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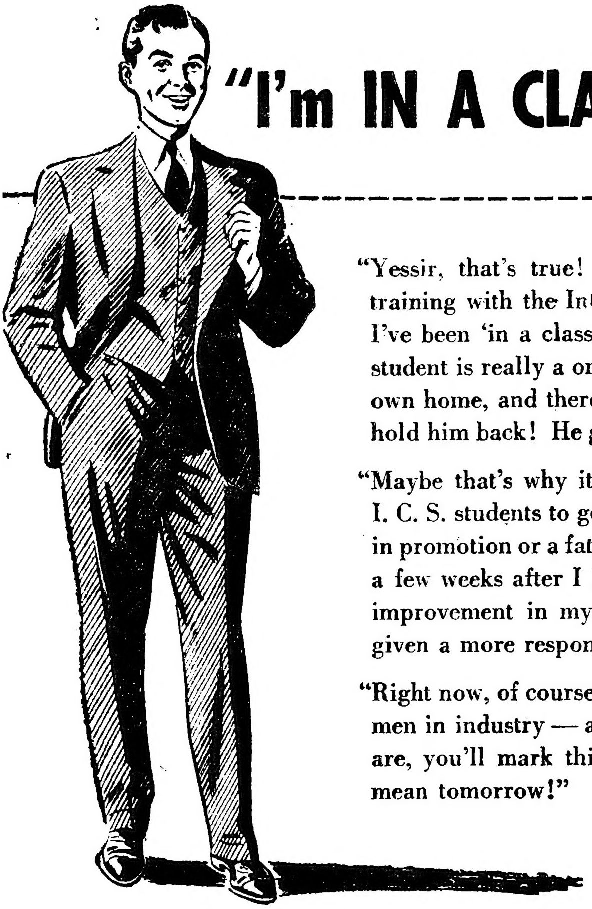

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STREET & SMITH'S

ROMANTIC RANGE

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YEARLY SUBSCRIPTIONS, $1.50 SINGLE COPIES, 15c

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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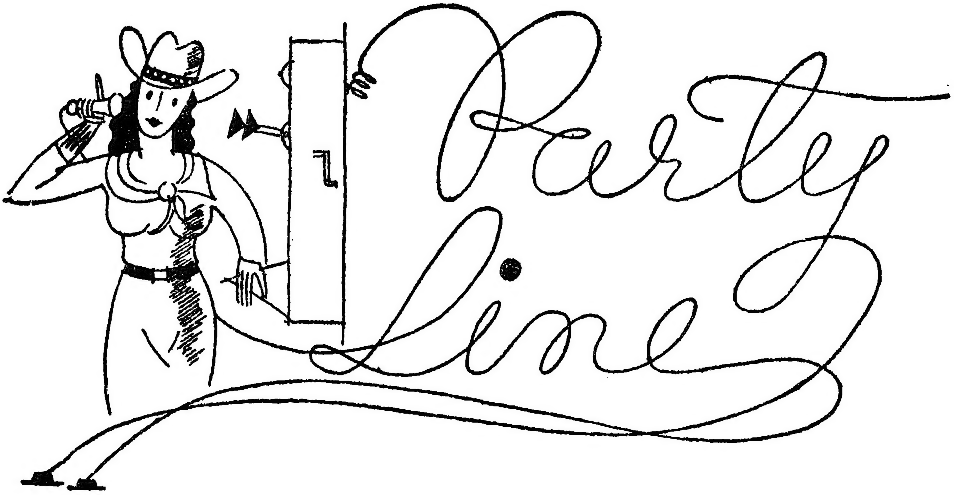


Howdy, neighbors, how are you all down the line? Well, this is sure a spring of mighty important changes, with folks hardly knowing what to expect next. It's a spring when many people will be planning a garden for the first time and the old-timers will be planting double the amount of foodstuff they usually have.

After a day of hard work, a bit of relaxin' is always in order and we thought you might like to hear a little bit about what you can expect in our next month's issue.

Anthony Carver, who seems to have a way with typewriters, has written a swell story, "The Field Artillery Comes West." In our last talk with Anthony we learned that besides story writin', the author has a strange cravin' for auctions of unclaimed goods and once bought a trunk for five dollars, with visions of having it filled with pieces of gold or diaries of wicked dark-eyed Spanish señoritas only to find upon finally getting it opened that it was filled to the brim with *Congressional Records*. To get back to our story, though. Our hero in it is a war casualty, who feels that he has no reason to go on living. When his ripe wheat burns, the townsfolk are sure he set it to collect his insurance. Their suspicion is only another reason for his distrust of everyone. When a gal named Tress arrives and sees what is happening, that his crops are going to ruin just at a time when food is so badly needed, and pitches in to help him—why, then, things begin to happen and a corkin' good story is the result.

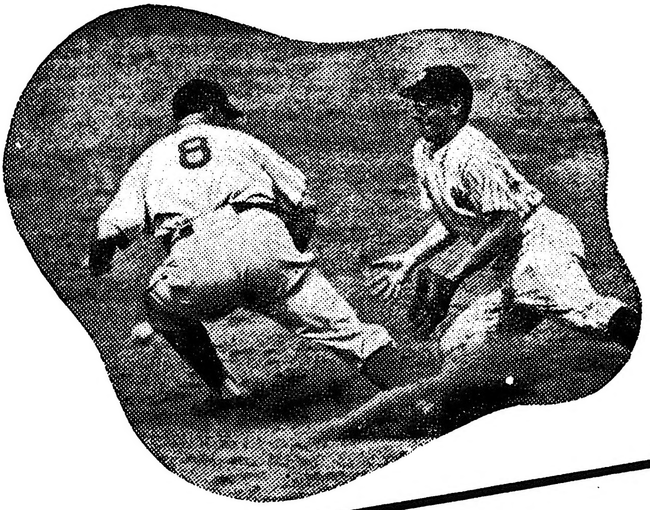
The popular author, Emile Humble, continues the autobiography of that lovable horse, Bob, who says, "I'm a four-legged devil, but humans could sure use some of my hoss sense, sweethearts in partic'lar." In this amusing story, "Bob, The Cowpony, Does His Bit," Bob is taken back home to the ranch by his ex-owner, Joe, after many years' separation. He is still as spirited and cussed as ever, despite his old age. Bob thinks that Joe's daughter ought to marry the handsome soldier-captain who has come to the ranch to round up horses for the army. It's Bob's private opinion that Joe's daughter is the prettiest filly for miles around, and it's through the pony's scheming that the two finally break down and get pretty romantic. There's a wedding—all on horseback—with Bob carrying the bride, and Bob thinks he's done a mighty good job with a pair of humans. And so do we!

Damaris Beckstead, true daughter of the West, and well-known to the readers of Party Line, will be with us again with a new story, "Pa's Gal." Damaris tells us, pale-faced Easterners that we are, that one of her ancestors up and dies with Custer, when the West was really wild and woolly. Her grandmother's bedtime stories were true stories of her family and the days in the Big Horn territory of Wyoming; many an exciting tale, too, of real encounters with the Indians has been handed down from one generation to another. Having other family connections engaged in the lumber business in Idaho, young Damaris was transplanted there and her education in the history of the West continued. So when she gives you a Western story, you may be sure she knows whereof she speaks. "Pa's Gal" has Mike for its young heroine. Although the apple of her mother's eye, her father had not much time for her. He had wanted a son. Knowing this, she takes the name "Mike," determined in every way to be the boy that he wanted. She can ride better than any man for miles around; she can rope a calf and do everything on the ranch just a little better than any man can do it. Tod, the man she loves, has little use for "efficient women" and women who "stick their noses into men's businesses." Mike tries to attract him by showing how capable she is, but when she realizes she is failing in this, she uses other tactics. No, we're not telling you any more. We won't spoil the story for you before you read it.

Eric Howard is another author familiar to the readers of Romantic Range. Mr. Howard, an Easterner "gone Western" (he was born in Maryland), has, since living in his adopted country, become quite an authority on the West. His chief interest, he tells us, outside his "chiefest" interest—the West itself—is the American Indians. Mr. Howard's story, "Down in Sonora," tells of the troubles of rancher Dan and his daughter, Molly-O, and their attempts to keep their ranch going. Further credit denied him everywhere, Dan knows of no other way out except to sell to the newcomer, Marker, who has been buying up every ranch in the valley. Why, no one knows. Young Jim, ranch hand in love with Molly, decides to do some investigatin' on his own, and what he does and what he finds out *and* what happens then, all adds up to a swell yarn.

Just about everyone we have ever known has been interested in what makes him or his best pal tick, why they get along so well on some things and fight like mad about others. Some people dismiss such traits in a man as just plain "cussedness." Others shake their heads, not knowing just what it is. Few people have ever suspected that their own handwriting is as revealing, as far as telling their weak spots as well as their good ones, as the noses on their faces. By having the handwriting of your best pal analyzed, and finding out just what makes him so darn touchy about certain things, may be the means of avoiding future petty quarrels that do nothing except upset and worry all concerned. Our new feature, "The Hitching Post," will, we promise, tell you something about yourself that you never knew before. So, cheerio, and happy reading!

BASEBALL-AS USUAL!



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ROMANTIC RENEGADE

A Short Novel

by Lee Ernenwein

There was big money to be made in the Blackjack Hills, and the law was in cahoots with the kill-crazy hombres out to make it.

I.

Jane Benteen drove six slat-ribbed steers out of the Blackjack Hills at noon. She was dressed in a man's cotton shirt and brush-scarred chaps and she rode with confident ease, but she was worried.

Narrowly, Jane watched high-riding thunderheads troop above the steepled crest of Rampart Divide. And because there'd been no rain in Apache Basin for ten tragic months, she said a silent prayer. For this was San Juan's Day and, according to tradition, the summer rains must set in by the birthday of St. John the Baptist, or there'd be no summer rains.

The six steers plodded into a dry wash—six shambling, hide-draped racks bearing Rafter B brands on bony hips. Their dragging hoofs stirred hock-deep dust against which Jane adjusted her neckerchief so that it shielded her mouth and nose. The thought came to her that one hour of steady rain would put running water in this wash. She tried to recall the last time she'd smelled wet greasewood's pungent odor or heard water dripping from a gallery's slanted roof. Almost a year ago. Big Bill had been alive then. He'd ridden into the Rafter B yard soaked to the skin and as happy as a wading duck.

One of the steers, a big brindle, stumbled and went down like a collapsing woodpile. Riding close, Jane popped his dusty rump again and again with the rope end, but the brindle stubbornly refused to budge until she dismounted and tailed him up. Finished with this tedious chore, Jane peered at the northern sky again. The rain-bearing clouds, she saw at once, were being blown beyond the Ramparts by a breeze hot and dry as the fumes of a blacksmith's forge. There'd be no rain now—no rain on San Juan's Day!

Shrugging in the fatalistic fashion of a good gambler losing his last white chip, Jane recalled her first San Juan's Day celebration with nostalgic sadness. Her dad, who'd been father, mother and Big Bill to her all the years she could remember, had taken her to Tucson on the stagecoach. The pueblo had been thronged with gay crowds. A huge throng had assembled along the north end of Calle Real to watch the sport of *juego de gallo,* wherein dashing riders roped roosters buried neck-deep in the ground.

There'd been horse racing, music and dancing and a sudden, wind-whipped shower later in the afternoon. Although the brief rain had scarcely laid the dust, it set the crowds to frenzied rejoicing. Big Bill had exclaimed, "A salvation shower—we'll have rain aplenty!" And so they had.

Wearily, Jane drew a sleeve across her perspiring forehead and watched the last of the clouds slide behind the Ramparts. "That does it," she said bleakly. "There'll be no salvation shower today."

Then she glanced at the slow-plodding steers and knew they were the last she'd drive to San Pedro. Without rain there'd be no grama grass this summer, no galleta nor tobosa. Even the mesquite beans would wither before they ripened. Sam Tiffany, she reflected, had been right when he said, "You can't lick a drought with sentiment. If you don't sell out soon you'll have nothing left to sell."

And at this moment, with utter futility having its way with her, Jane saw the tall, dark-faced stranger sitting a rat-tailed roan fifteen feet away. For a single instant, as she met his contemplative glance, she felt a sudden sense of relief, of escape from long days and nights of aloneness. But almost at once it occurred to her that this rider had been watching while she tailed up the big brindle. He hadn't offered his help—he'd just sat there like a dude at a fiesta!

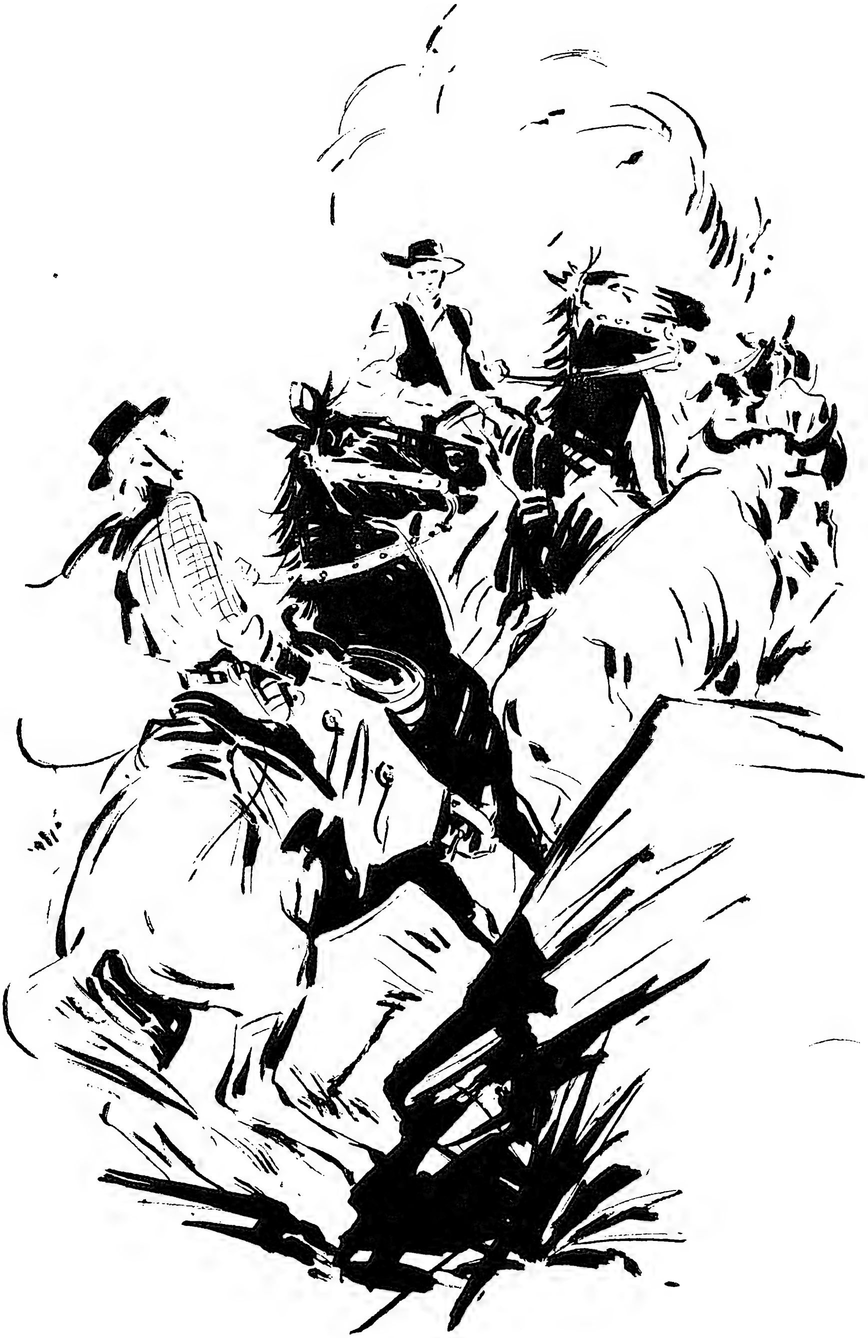
Jane lowered her neckerchief and asked sarcastically, "Are you looking for someone in particular, or are you just looking?"

A slow grin creased his lean, sun-blackened face. It put tiny crinkles at the corners of his dark eyes and turned a scar on his left cheek into a crooked dimple.

"Just looking," he drawled in a low, deep voice that was like a lazy trumpet. "And wondering what kind of country this Arizona is. Back in Texas men do the riding. Our womenfolks don't sashay around the range with ropes in their hands. They carry parasols, mostly." Then he added, "Must be a shortage of men hereabouts."

"We've got men aplenty," Jane declared and glanced deliberately at the gun he wore in a greased half-breed holster. "Too many of one kind."

That thinly veiled accusation didn't seem to register. His eyes continued their appraisal and, presently, as if thinking aloud, he said, "Clark Randall, you're looking at a sure-enough self-sufficient gal, one



Jane saw the tall, dark-faced stranger sitting a rat-tailed roan fifteen feet away and at once it occurred to her that this rider had been watching while she tailed up the big brindle, but he hadn't offered to help.

of them Joan of Arc breed of female."

Then he asked with mock gravity, "Is your name Joan, ma'am?"

The way he said it, like a small boy tantalizing a schoolmarm, brought an involuntary smile to Jane's lips. This Clark Randall looked like a saddle tramp, but his rash grin was good to see.

"My name," she said civilly, "is Jane."

"Reckon Jane must be American for Joan," he mused, taking off his dust-peppered hat. "I'm pleased to meet you, ma'am."

His glance shifted to Jane's saddle-slung canteen. He moistened his cracked, sun-blistered lips and said, "I ran out of water about this time yesterday."

"No wonder you're glad to meet me," Jane exclaimed.

She rode over, handed him the canteen, and when he'd drunk, she said slyly, "I don't suppose your Texas women carry canteens along with their parasols."

"No," he admitted.

Whereupon Jane asked, "Did you ever try drinking from a parasol, Mr. Randall?"

Afterward, while the steers stumbled out the last five miles to San Pedro, Jane told him about her father's death three months before, and his long feud with Tex Hockaday, who owned the Spear H, the only other outfit in the Blackjack Hills.

"They'd quarreled about water rights for years, but there'd been no serious trouble until last fall, when Hockaday accused my father of rustling. Soon after that two of our riders were shot at from ambush. A week later another one was wounded, and a Spear H man was killed.

"When Hockaday fenced Raider's Gap and cut us off from Rillito Creek, dad dug a well on Tabletop Mesa. His crew had quit, so he did all the digging—worked himself to a shadow and spent his last dollar to buy a windmill."

"Get water?" Randall asked.

Jane nodded, said grimly, "It would've filled a big tank in one week's time. But it was dynamited the day after it was completed."

"Hockaday?" Randall asked.

Jane made an open-palmed gesture with her hands. "Who else?" she said. "Dad died three days later from a heart attack."

"So that's why you're doing a man's work," Randall mused soberly.

Jane nodded. Clark Randall's rash grin and deep, drawling voice reminded her of Big Bill—that and the way he rode, straight as a lance with his hat tilted at a rakish angle. But the resemblance ended there. For Big Bill had been no saddle tramp, and he wouldn't have sat by idly while a girl tailed up a steer.

She asked presently, "On your way to Tucson?"

"Well, not exactly," Randall said. "Just taking a look-see over the hill."

Even though she'd already tabbed him for a fiddle-footed drifter, Jane felt a curious sense of disappointment at his admission. "Drifters," her father had once declared, "are useless as tumbleweeds. They don't build nothin' but a lot of hoss tracks in the dust."

Presently, Randall asked, "Is Hockaday cramped for space?"

"No, it's not that. Right now there isn't enough graze in our end of the Blackjack Hills to feed a burro."

Randall said thoughtfully, "That new railroad they're building across the desert might have something to do with it. Will the rails go through your land?"

"No," Jane murmured. "The right of way has already been mapped out. It won't hit the Blackjack Hills at all."

Topping a long, low sandhill, the steers angled into the stage road half a mile east of town. Randall gazed thoughtfully at the twin rows of sun-hammered buildings and asked, "San Pedro?"

Jane nodded, and saw his lips tighten. He said flatly, "A long way from Texas."

When they reached the cattle pens at San Pedro's east end, Randall opened the gate. Then, not waiting for the steers to shuffle inside, he called, "Thanks for the water, Joan of Arc," and rode toward town.

Jane closed the gate and sat for a time watching the steers quench their thirst at the watering trough. Then she rode slowly along Main Street and, seeing a Spear H bronc at the Belladonna Saloon hitch rack, she guessed that Tex Hockaday was in town. Passing Tiffany's Mercantile, she glimpsed Sam Tiffany at the counter inside.

Sam had asked her to marry him a year ago, but she'd turned him down with the excuse she wouldn't leave Big Bill. Now he wanted her to sell Rafter B to skinflint Banker Pettigrew and enjoy the luxury of town life as Mrs. Sam Tiffany. He couldn't comprehend her refusal to part with a drought-ravaged ranch just because a stubborn old cowman had died fighting for its survival. He didn't understand that Rafter B was a monument to the finest father a girl ever had.

Sam, she reflected, was entirely practical. To him a ranch was like a sack of flour, something to be bought and sold. She waved a greeting to Sophie Carradine, who stood in the doorway of her millinery shop, and rode on to the O. K. Livery.

Jock Plunkett, who'd drunk many a glass of bourbon with Big Bill, greeted her in gallant fashion. "You're lookin' prettier every time I see you," he declared.

Jane smiled and watched him lead her horse into the stable. But, presently, when she walked toward Shad Pettigrew's bank, the smile faded. Those six slat-ribbed steers wouldn't do much more than pay the interest on the mortgage Pettigrew held against Rafter B.

It was coming dusk when Clark Randall stood on the Belladonna stoop, idly watching Main Street. He saw Sheriff Gil Brannon come out of the courthouse and quarter across to Tiffany's Mercantile. The pulp-faced lawman hailed two passing riders and shook hands with a homesteader before going into the store.

"Must be coming close to election time," Randall mused cynically, and glimpsed Jane Benteen standing in the doorway of Pettigrew's bank.

The thought came to him that she would be beautiful in a long, flowing gown, carrying a pink parasol. She stepped down to the sidewalk and a man followed her outside, a gaunt, hawk-faced old man whose bald head seemed too large for the scrawny neck that supported it.

The man said censuringly, "You're playing a losing game, Jane, a foolish game."

She shrugged, and walking on down the street went into the Bon Ton Millinery Shop.

A lathy, gray-haired cowman came out of the mercantile carrying a half-filled sack of provisions. He went over to the saloon hitch rack, tied the sack behind his saddle and then rode down an alley just east of the saloon. No word or sign passed between the rider and Randall, yet a moment later Randall walked leisurely into the alley. He turned into a wagon yard behind the Wells Fargo stage station, grasped the old cowman's hand and asked, "Why'd you make out you didn't know me in the saloon, Tex? What's up?"

Tex Hockaday said, "A lot has happened since I wrote that letter, Clark. What took you so damn long getting here?"

He was old enough to be Randall's father, but they'd been saddlemates in Jeb Stuart's cavalry and, because Hockaday had once saved Randall's life, the bond of friendship had remained strong between them.

"Your letter came while I was North with a trail herd," Randall explained. "I hit a shuck for Arizona soon as I got it. Thought I'd find you fanning a six-gun with your back to the wall."

Hockaday grunted a curse. "I'm up against a wall, all right. But the shootin' has sort of petered out. The galoot I was fightin' with died three months ago."

"Big Bill Benteen?" Randall asked.

"Yeah. And the strange part of it is, the rustlin' has kept on. I can't figger it out, Clark. At the rate my stuff is disappearin', I won't be able to gather enough beef to meet my note at the bank come roundup time, which means I lose Spear H, lock, stock and barrel!"

"What you figgering to do about it?" Randall asked.

Hockaday nudged back his battered hat. "Only one thing left to do," he muttered. "I got to find out what Jane Benteen is doin' with the beef she's sneakin' off my range."

"You sure she's the one?" Randall asked wonderingly.

"Who else?" Hockaday demanded. "She says I killed her dad just the same as if I'd put a slug in his heart."

Randall was on the verge of asking about the dynamited well when Hockaday said urgently, "Jane Benteen has got to get her Rafter B stuff out of the hills and hold it close to the ranch windmill, which is all the water she's got left. To do that she'll need a rider, and I got a hunch she'd hire you if you offered to wait a spell for your wages. If you was riding for her, you might find out what she's done with the stuff she's rustled from me."

"How about Sheriff Brannon?" Randall asked. "Hasn't he been able to dig up any clues?"

Hockaday loosed a gusty curse. "Brannon don't give a damn what happens to me. He makes a bluff at ridin' through the hills all the time, but he's close friends with Sam Tiffany, who's scheduled to marry Jane Benteen. So you can see what kind of help I can expect from Brannon. I got no crew left, and it takes all my time workin' cattle. Will you make a try at hirin' on at Rafter B?"

"Sure," Randall told him without hesitation.

Tex Hockaday slapped him on the shoulder, said, "There's a dance at the courthouse tonight and chances are Jane will be there. Talk her into hirin' you, then soon as you find out what's goin' on, slip through Raider's Gap and let me know."

The old cowman rode on down the alley and Randall was turning back toward Main Street when he saw an obscure shape fade back between two buildings directly across from the wagon-yard entrance. Guessing instantly that the skulker would sneak back to the street, Randall hurried up to the corner and waited for a man to show at the next alley head. But although he stood there for at least ten minutes, no one appeared.

There had been something curiously familiar about that skulking shape—something that had made a fleeting imprint on the fringes of Randall's mind. Yet he couldn't identify the elusive impression, nor guess at its significance.

Like many another settlement in the cow country, San Pedro was strictly a Saturday-night town. All afternoon, dust-churning wagons and riders had drifted in from far-off ranches. All showed signs of drought-borne poverty, yet because there'd been rainless years in Apache Basin before, and would be again, these desert folk came to town as usual.

Lounging on the Acme Hotel veranda steps after supper, Clark Randall watched the ebb and flow of traffic on Main Street. He was shaping up a cigarette when two fashionably dressed young women came from the Bon Ton Millinery Shop, their faces showing plainly in the hotel's shaft of lamplight. And one of those faces belonged to Jane Benteen!

Randall was astonished. It didn't seem possible that a girl could contrive so great a change in so short a time. She was no longer a rope-swinging cowgirl. Her oval face was framed by lustrous sorrel hair drawn loosely back into a braided bunch at the nape of her neck. She was wearing a dove-gray gown which fitted snugly at her slender waist, outlining the feminine curves of her lovely figure. She was, Randall thought, the most charming young lady he'd ever seen.

Not until Jane stopped and smilingly introduced him to Sophie Carradine, did Randall cease staring. Sophie asked, "Are you attending the dance, Mr. Randall?" and gave him a coquettish smile.

He acknowledged that question with a grin, then looked into Jane's upturned eyes and asked quietly, "Am I invited?"

Their glances met and merged and, for a silent interval, time stood still for Clark Randall. Then she said softly, "Yes, you're invited."

"I'll be over there directly, as soon as I can get a shave," Randall declared, and remembering that Tex had said this girl was scheduled to marry Sam Tiffany, felt a sharp barb of jealousy.

At nine o'clock the orchestra was playing a waltz and Jane was dancing with Clark Randall. He was, she thought, the most accomplished dancer she'd ever met. Recalling how he'd offered to give her a hand at Rafter B, saying he'd wait for his wages, Jane smiled happily. San Juan's Day had brought no rain, but it had brought Clark Randall. Perhaps, with his help, she'd save most of her half-starved, waterless cattle by bringing them down out of the hills. Perhaps she'd beat the drought after all.

Then, as the dance ended and Clark said, "That was swell," Jane saw Sam Tiffany coming across the floor.

She agreed, "Yes, Clark, it was lovely."

The orchestra began again, playing the soft, sweet strains of "Marquita Linda." Whereupon Randall said grinningly, "My favorite tune," and was reaching for her when Sam Tiffany shouldered him aside.

"This one is mine," Sam declared, and smiling down at Jane, added, "Isn't it, honey?"

If Jane had said "yes" very quickly she might have headed off trouble then and there. But instead she hesitated, glancing at Randall. And then it was too late. For Clark said very quietly, "No, mister, this dance is mine."

Using the same arrogant tactics Tiffany had used a moment ago, Randall shouldered the blocky-faced merchant aside and, for a moment, Jane had this picture of them—one lean, dark and hungry-looking, the other broad, blond and self-assured. Sam had never acted jealous or brashly possessive before. She was wondering about this sudden change in him when he exclaimed angrily, "If you didn't have that gun I'd smash you down, saddle tramp!"

Clark unbuckled his gun gear with practiced skill and was dropping it to the floor when Tiffany hit him.

That unexpected blow knocked Randall down. And it stopped the dance. Sophie Carradine screamed. Eve Pettigrew, who'd been dancing with her banker father, called applaudingly, "That's the way to hit a man, Sam!"

Jane scarcely heard the startled exclamations that ran through the crowd. She was staring at the blood on Clark's lips and feeling amazement at Sam Tiffany's brutal unfairness. He'd always seemed so square and gentlemanly.

Clark got up. He grinned, wiped blood from his lips, and charged at Sam like a lean black tiger attacking a tawny-eyed lion.

The rest was fast, furiously fast. Clark evaded Sam's ponderous fists with expert agility. He ducked, dodged and shifted, then darted in close, pounding Sam's big body with sledge-hammer blows. When Sam's guarding hands came down to protect his stomach, Randall loosed a savage two-fisted attack to the face that made Sam's blond head snap back with each successive blow.

Tiffany tried to dodge those rapierlike fists and, failing that, barged into head-on collision. That smashing impact knocked Randall off balance and, for a fearful instant, Jane thought Sam was going to batter him down by the sheer weight of his body. But Clark sidestepped hastily and came in swinging. The smash of his fists made meaty *plops* of sound against the room's silence. For one brief moment he drove successive rights and lefts into Tiffany's bloody face, then he stepped back and, retrieving his gun gear from the floor, watched Sam fall slowly.

Tiffany's body made a low thud when it struck the floor. Breath whooshed out of him in a gusty sigh and for a suspended interval no one moved or spoke. Then Eve Pettigrew knelt beside Tiffany and Sheriff Brannon stepped up in front of Randall, saying crustily, "We don't cotton to trouble-making trail tramps in this town. I'm giving you till sunup to finish your business in San Pedro and get out of town!"

Randall asked tauntingly, "And after that?"

Red pennants of anger flushed Brannon's jowly face. "After sunup tomorrow, I'll arrest you on suspicion of rustling. We've had too much of that around here!"

Jane stepped quickly forward. "Mr. Randall is going to ride for me at Rafter B," she declared.

That brought a flurry of exclamations from the crowd. But it didn't seem to surprise Sheriff Brannon. He said, "My warning stands regardless, Miss Jane. The deadline is sunup. After that he's jail bait in this county!"

He turned abruptly away then and Randall asked, "Want to go home now, Jane?"

Jane nodded.

It was past three o'clock in the morning when Jane blew out the lamp in her bedroom at Rafter B. She hadn't been up this late, nor danced so many dances, nor talked so much in months. Yet she wasn't sleepy.

Instead of getting into bed she went to the window and, glancing across the yard, saw the light go out in the bunkhouse. It had been a long time since there'd been a light over there, or a second saddle on the pole in front of the horse corral. It was good to have a man on the place again, made it seem almost like old times.

Jane got into bed. But she didn't go to sleep for quite awhile. Sharp impressions kept flitting through her mind. The brash arrogance of Sam Tiffany, his curious change from a gentlemanly merchant to an anger-prodded brawler capable of hitting a man when he wasn't looking. She had always admired Sam. But she couldn't admire a man who didn't fight fair. Remembering how Sophie Carradine had almost convinced her that she should accept Sam's proposal of marriage, Jane grimaced.

She remembered the startled look on Sophie's face when Clark asked if she wanted to go home. And ten minutes later, while Jane had changed into her riding togs at the millinery shop, Sophie had exclaimed, "What a senseless thing to do! Now Eve Pettigrew will take Sam away from you sure!"

But Jane hadn't felt foolish at all. For the first time in months she'd felt happy and gloriously alive. Afterward, riding home, she'd told Clark how much Rafter B meant to her, explained why losing it would seem like losing all she had left of Big Bill. He had reached over, patted her shoulder and said, "When I offered to ride for you I wasn't interested in saving your ranch. But I am now."

He had asked questions about Sheriff Brannon, Sam Tiffany, Banker Pettigrew and the cowmen in Reservation Valley. But he hadn't mentioned Tex Hockaday, and when she'd suggested Hockaday was the one he should be asking about, Clark drawled secretively, "I know all I need to know about that hombre."

Jane had been wondering about that when they said "good night." But a moment later it had seemed unimportant, utterly trivial. For just before Clark went into the bunkhouse he'd called, "You looked prettier than a litter of spotted pups in that gray dress, Jane. And you danced like a fiddler's dream!"

II.

It was after eight o'clock when Jane awoke. Hurriedly building a fire in the kitchen stove, she mixed up a pan of biscuits and put on the coffee. She was getting a slab of bacon from the smokehouse when Clark Randall sauntered across the yard.

"Good morning, boss, ma'am," he greeted grinningly.

Jane said, "Fine time of day for a brush-popper to be shedding his blankets," and spoiled the mock gravity of those words with a cheery smile.

Afterward, when Randall had finished his fifth biscuit, he proclaimed solemnly, "Best I ever ate, bar none!"

The sound of walking horses came to Jane then. Going quickly to the door she saw Sheriff Brannon and Sam Tiffany ride across the yard and, remembering the lawman's threat the night before, felt a quick thrust of apprehension.

But Clark Randall's voice was calm when he drawled, "So Brannon meant what he said."

Sam Tiffany touched his hat with the habitual courtesy he'd always shown her and called, "Good morning, Jane."

His right eye was swollen and discolored. There was a bruise on the cheek below it and his lips showed cuts. When Jane acknowledged his greeting, he said, "Sheriff Brannon has information that may make you change your mind about hiring a renegade Texan."

Brannon eyed Randall warily for a moment. Then he turned to Jane. "I was in the Belladonna when this jigger came in late yesterday. I saw Randall smile and walk up to Tex Hockaday like he was going to shake hands, but Tex turned away from him and didn't speak. Later on, when Hockaday rode into the alley, Randall followed him. Figgering them two was up to something crooked, I did a little prowling, got close enough to hear their confab."

"That's not true!" Jane exclaimed.

She turned expectantly to Randall, waiting for him to deny the accusation. But he just stood there staring at Sheriff Brannon with a speculative squint in his eyes. Finally, he said, "I thought there was something familiar about the galoot I saw sneak between those buildings. It must've been the faint shine of that tin thing on your vest."

Those words, so calmly spoken, were like blows to Jane Benteen. They meant that he had talked with Tex Hockaday! They must mean he'd been in cahoots with the Spear H owner when he offered to hire out—

"Tell her the rest of it," Sam said exultantly. "Tell her why Randall offered to ride for her."

Brannon's right hand kept close to his holster and even when he began talking to Jane, his eyes shifted constantly to Randall. "Hockaday told him how Rafter B had rustled a lot of Spear H steers. Tex said for him to hire out with you and then first chance he got, sneak over to Spear H for another confab."

Astonishment ran rampant through Jane's mind. How could Clark Randall have fooled her so completely? Why had he deliberately tricked her into hiring him—for what purpose?

Abruptly, Jane remembered their talk the night before, how Clark had failed to ask any questions about Hockaday. He'd said, "I know all I need to know about that hombre."

That did it. That pushed disbelief completely out of her and left a sharp barb of resentment in its place. For the first time in her life Jane felt ashamed—ashamed of her own stupidity. And it was ironical that the man who'd swept aside the barriers of her judgment should be the one who had called her "a sure-enough, self-sufficient gal."

Sam Tiffany smiled, a sort of brotherly, understanding smile. He said, "Don't feel bad about it, honey. Just tell him to skedaddle and we'll run him clear out of the basin for you."

Jane noticed that Sam was wearing a gun. She saw his right hand slide toward it, then stop abruptly. And Sheriff Brannon was sitting rigidly stiff in the saddle with a pop-eyed expression on his face. Then, as she glanced at Clark Randall she saw the unsheathed gun in his hand, heard him say tauntingly, "So you town dudes are going to run me out of the basin!"

Standing there with his high shoulders propped indolently against a veranda post, Randall watched surprise and chagrin change the expressions of the two riders in front of him. Sheriff Brannon, he saw quickly, was willing to call it a day. But Tiffany had more pride. The merchant's blocky face flushed red in the morning sunlight, swift anger brightened his brown eyes, and his fingers stayed close to his holstered gun.

Randall placed an accurate reckoning on Tiffany's make-up. The merchant had a bully streak in him that his good manners couldn't quite conceal.

Randall said softly, "I'll leave this

ranch any time Miss Jane tells me to go, but I'm not being run off by a brace of gentle Annies."

Then, swiftly sheathing his gun, he snapped savagely, "Make your play, Tiffany, or hightail back to town where you belong!"

Jane exclaimed, "No, Sam, don't draw!"

She moved quickly in front of Tiffany and said, "I don't want any shooting here. Please go, Sam. And thanks for coming."

The big merchant relaxed at once. He smiled down at Jane, then glanced at Randall and declared, "She's boss here, saddle tramp. So we'll do as she says. But it'll be different if you show up in town. A lot different!"

Then he wheeled his horse and rode out of the yard with Sheriff Brannon close behind him. Jane stood watching them for a moment. When she turned around she said grimly, "Now you may go also."

"I know it seems strange," Randall declared, "but I can explain my friendship for Tex Hockaday so's you'll understand it."

"I understand all I'll ever want to know about that, or you," Jane said flatly. She pointed northwest, saying, "Spear H is over there."

She went into the house then, washed the breakfast dishes and tried to tell herself there was just bitter, resentful disappointment behind her unshed tears. Disappointment due to losing a rider needed for the roundup of starving cattle. But she knew there was a great deal more to it than that. There was a sense of disillusionment, of something new and shining suddenly tarnished.

When she went to the corral for her horse, Jane glimpsed Randall rimming the ridge above Rafter B. For a lingering moment his tall shape was sharply etched against the skyline, then he rode across the crest and Jane said, "Good riddance!"

Endeavoring to force a more convincing tone, she said it again. But, somehow, her voice didn't sound convincing at all. It was fantastic, she reflected, that a girl should feel such a tumult of emotions because of one man—utterly ridiculous that she should have trusted a footloose drifter she hadn't known existed until the day before!

But that realization didn't keep her from remembering how happy she'd been last night, dancing with Clark Randall. She recalled how intimate and genuine his voice had semed during their conversation on the long ride home, and this morning, when he'd praised the biscuits she'd baked for him. His presence here had dispersed the forlorn shadows of aloneness, had made Rafter B almost like the cheerful place it once had been.

"Jane Benteen," she exclaimed, "you're a silly, romantic goose!"

She saddled her claybank gelding and rode into the hills, firmly resolved to forget she'd ever met a man named Randall. There were other things to think about. The six steers she'd driven to San Pedro had paid the interest on Big Bill's debt and left a little over for a few bales of hay. But unless she hurried, there would be no cattle to feed.

Two hours of leisurely riding brought Clark Randall to the dynamited well on Tabletop Mesa at noon. Here he halted, scanning the windmill's scattered wreckage, sensing the full futility of an old man's heroic effort to get water.

During his ride up through the timbered hills, Randall had seen that this range was as Jane had described it—with scarcely graze enough to feed a burro. Why, he asked himself, would anyone try to steal this drought-ravaged land? Tex Hockaday had never been a greedy man. Even though he had cut Benteen's cattle off from water with his fence at Raider's Gap, he wouldn't blast a neighbor's well.

Then, as Randall was about to ride on across the mesa, his glance centered on the discarded windlass which had been used to lift dirt-filled buckets from the shoveled shaft. There was something strangely familiar about its hoist beam, something about the size and shape of this six-foot length of hand-hewn timber. For several moments, while he fashioned a cigarette and smoked it, Randall studied the hoist beam, tried to identify the reason it seemed so familiar. Then, suddenly, he knew, and with that knowledge he had a swift understanding of why someone wanted Rafter B badly enough to kill and connive to get it!

There was money to be made in these Blackjack Hills—big money. And it had nothing to do with grass or water or cattle!

"An old game," he exclaimed, "and a slick one!"

No wonder there'd been a sudden outbreak of trouble between the only two ranches in the Blackjack Hills. Hockaday and Benteen were cowmen, not connivers. They'd been framed into a feud by the simple process of sneaking small bunches of Spear H stock across Rafter B range. Afterward, when Hockaday had accused Benteen of the rustling, a hidden gun hawk had probably ambushed riders of both ranches, and when Tex fenced Raider's Gap, forcing Benteen to dig this well, the tricky game had been climaxed by blasting Big Bill's last hope of survival.

That much Randall was sure of, so sure he was tempted to ride back and tell Jane about it. Once she was convinced of Hockaday's innocence, she'd have no reason to resent his friendship with Tex. And that was the only barrier between them. But although he was urgently eager to renew friendly relations with her, Randall resisted the temptation. Better, he decided, to go and tell Tex and get busy solving the rest of the riddle.

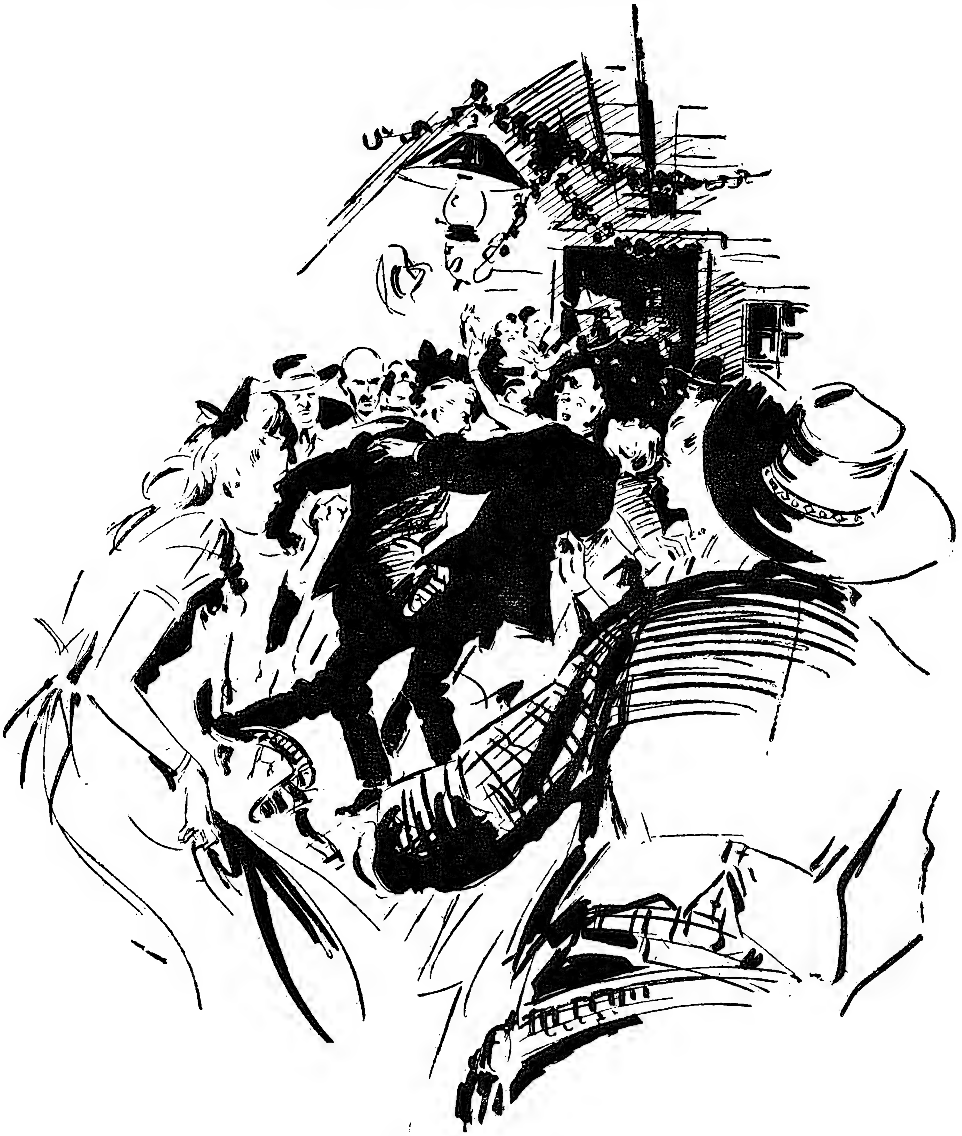
Spurring his horse into a run, Randall rode across the mesa and turned into a deep-rutted trail that dropped into a valley just south of Raider's Gap. He was watching a small band of cattle troop single file across a broken fence down there when a gun began blasting on the wooded slope above the gap.

For an instant, as powder smoke plumed from the distant rifle barrel, Randall thought he was the target. He whirled his horse behind a rock outcrop and was snatching his carbine from its scabbard when it occurred to him that no rifle would carry across the valley. But the reports carried, and they were continuing at space intervals, as if each shot were being carefully aimed.

And so they were, for when Randall glanced downward he knew those slugs were being sent at the cattle. In the time it had taken for five reports to drift across the valley, three cows were down and a fourth was bawling out its pain on wide-propped feet!

Shifting his gaze to the continuing puffs of powder smoke, Randall cursed futilely. There was nothing he could do—no way of halting this wanton slaughter. The ridge, thickly wooded with blackjack and live oak, was at least a mile away. The cow killer was well concealed, his presence indicated only by the smoke plumes and recurring flashes of sunlight on a rifle barrel.

There was little doubt in Randall's mind about ownership of the cows across the fence. He felt certain they were Jane Benteen's, and



Randall unbuckled his gun gear with practiced skill and was dropping it to the floor when Tiffany hit him. The unexpected blow knocked him down.

equally certain that the man who was shooting them had also dynamited Big Bill's well. It occurred to him, then, that the distant slug-slammer might not be alone.

Hard on the heels of that thought came realization that Sheriff Brannon and Sam Tiffany might have circled and ridden fast enough to reach Raider's Gap since leaving Rafter B. They could have broken the fence, driven the cattle onto Spear H range for slaughter with the intention of framing this crime on him!

Then, as the shooting ceased and Randall watched the last cow collapse, another possibility struck him. Tex Hockaday might be up there on the ridge, might have taken this means of eliminating unwelcome stock which had broken through his fence!

Randall was thinking about that as he sent his bronc down the trail at a reckless run. When he reached the slaughter scene he found four cows and two calves dead. A fifth cow, shot through the side, stood weaving with staring eyes, unmindful of the terrified calf crouched against her.

Cursing softly, Randall raised his carbine and, taking careful aim, ended the cow's misery with a bullet between the eyes. For a long moment he watched the slick-eared little calf nudge its dead mother, then, because the calf was doomed to slow death by starvation, he grudgingly gave it the same merciful release he'd given its mother.

When he rode up the slope he hoped fervently that he'd find two sets of horse tracks on the ridge. Tex, he told himself, wouldn't make buzzard bait out of anybody's cattle. But a half-hour later he found a trampled place in the trees above the Gap and wasn't quite sure. For there was only one set of tracks here!

Picking up an empty shell, he saw that it was a .44 Henry flat and frowningly recalled that there'd been a Henry rifle in Tex Hockaday's saddle scabbard when his horse stood in front of the Belladonna Saloon the day before.

Grimly, in the fashion of a man doing a chore he dreads yet must do, Randall followed the single set of hoofprints up the ridge. If they led him to Spear H he would be up against a tough problem, would have to choose between loyalty to an old friend and an urgent desire to aid a courageous girl save her home. It wouldn't be an easy choice to make.

At the crest of the ridge, Randall rested his winded horse. Except for a few gnarled piñon, this summit was bare of vegetation and it afforded him an unobstructed view of the surrounding country. North and south, the Blackjack Hills made gray-green mounds against the tawny desert which sprawled for fifty miles on either side of them. Westward, the hills leveled off into a mesquite-dotted plain and because the hoofprints had turned abruptly in that direction, Randall scanned the lower slopes for sight of the rider he was trailing. Shading his eyes against the sun's slanting rays, he glimpsed a moving plume of dust rising from the timber far below him, caught a glint of sunlit metal briefly showing between the trees.

Whereupon, Clark Randall rode down into the timber with a growing cheerfulness. These horse tracks weren't leading him toward Spear H now—they were heading straight for San Pedro!

III.

Jane Benteen was pushing three cows with calves out of the brush below Tabletop Mesa when the reports of distant gunfire drifted down the valley. Halting her horse, she counted five distinct explosions and guessed their origin as somewhere close to Raider's Gap. Then, as four more blasts came at spaced intervals, she whirled her horse and rode northward at a run.

Gunfire at the Gap might mean almost anything. But because the memory of Clark Randall's departure was like a nudging hand at her elbow, she could think of only one reason for the shooting. Sam and Sheriff Brannon, she guessed instantly, had ridden to Raider's Gap and were shooting it out with Clark. They were paying him off for his taunting insults that morning!

Jane was within a mile of Raider's Gap when she heard two more shots, widely spaced. Rushing her horse through an arroyo she gained its opposite bank and, gazing ahead, saw a rider jog across the valley and put his horse up the west slope. The distance was too great for her to identify the horseman, yet something about the way he rode made Jane feel sure it was Randall.

Relief rushed through her. For, even though she couldn't be positive it was Clark, she knew it wasn't Sam Tiffany or Sheriff Brannon. They'd both been wearing white shirts, while this rider wore a dark one.

She watched him disappear into the trees, wondered what all the shooting had been about. Then, glimpsing the sprawled shapes of dead cattle and the broken fence behind them, Jane had her answer. And, for the second time that day, she was close to tears—tears of righteous anger and frustration.

Jock Plunkett was sitting on the doorway bench when Clark Randall rode up to the O. K. Livery at dusk. A plump, round-faced man in his early forties, Plunkett had a jester's jovial way with him.

"Howdy, fist fighter," he greeted. "What's Rafter B's one-man roundup crew doin' in town this early?"

Randall grinned and dismounted. "Just taking a look-see over the hill," he said. Then, watching Main Street, he asked casually, "Somebody ride in from the east just ahead of me?"

"Yeah, Sheriff Brannon," Jock announced. "Him and Sam Tiffany rode off early this morning, but Sam beat Brannon back by better'n three hours."

That information brought a gusty sigh of gladness to Randall's lips. All the way in from the Blackjack Hills, he'd kept telling himself that it wasn't Tex Hockaday he was following. But because Tex carried a Henry rifle, Clark hadn't been able to forget the empty shells he'd found. Now Plunkett's report cinched his hunch that Sheriff Brannon had not only butchered the cows at Raider's Gap, but had also blasted Big Bill's well and ambushed a dozen riders in a fake range war!

"How do you like ridin' for a lady?" Plunkett inquired.

Randall said smilingly, "First class," and, watching the street, saw Sam Tiffany come out of his store and speak to a man on the stoop. A moment later Sheriff Brannon and Shad Pettigrew stepped from the bank. Brannon went directly to the Belladonna, and the hawk-faced banker hurried over to the mercantile.

"Wonder what all the fuss 'n' feathers is about?" Jock muttered. "Brannon rode to the mercantile a bit ago like the devil was after him. Then he ran over to the bank and now Shad Pettigrew is bustlin' around busy as a bee."

For a moment the significance of this news evaded Randall. Then, as Sheriff Brannon came out of the saloon with two men and shouted, "Hey, Jock, saddle up some horses for a posse right quick!" Randall realized what was taking place.

Brannon had brought news of the Raider's Gap sloughter. The drygulching lawman had probably reported seeing Clark Randall shoot a bunch of Rafter B cattle.

Jock Plunkett reached up and lit the doorway lantern. It cast a yellow glow across the entrance as Randall grasped his bronc's dangling reins and, leaping into saddle, whirled the roan into a pivoting turn.

"What the hell!" Plunkett exclaimed.

And Sam Tiffany yelled, "That's him at the barn—that's Randall!"

Even as the roan lunged away

from the stable, Randall's mind registered the fact there was slight chance for escape here. Sheriff Brannon's gun was already blasting, its muzzle flare redly slashing the shadows. Somewhere down the street a woman screamed, that shrill sound warning Randall that he couldn't fire at Brannon without endangering innocent bystanders.

The lawman's first two slugs whined wide, and that surprised Randall. He was now squarely in a bright bloom of lamplight from the Acme Hotel. His shoulder muscles flinched at each successive gun blast, for he made a target Brannon shouldn't miss. But no slug smashed into Randall's back, and because the sheriff stood directly in front of his companions, those other guns didn't open up until Randall was through the shaft of lamplight.

Then, just as he yanked the roan into a sharp turn at a cross street, all those guns exploded at once. Slugs slammed into a corner of the building behind Randall, one so close it showered his hat with splinters. Then he was around the corner and because Sheriff Brannon had missed five easy shots, Randall loosed an exultant rebel yell. It seemed almost as if the pulpy-faced lawman had wanted him to escape, as if Brannon had missed on purpose.

Later, Clark Randall was to remember this fleeting, half-formed impression and realize its importance. But now he had other things to think about. Pulling his horse into another sharp right turn, Randall rode along an unlighted passageway which opened into the alley across from the Wells Fargo wagon yard. Dismounting at the gate, Randall led his horse through a haphazard jumble of freight wagons and, reaching the yard's far side, stood with gun in hand, tensely listening. He might be cornered here like a rat in a trap, but this was the way the game had to be played.

Riders were already pounding down the rear passageway. If they turned left, he'd have plenty of time for the job he'd come here to do. Hastily taking stock of his surroundings, Randall reckoned he was directly behind the Wells Fargo station which was next door to Shad Pettigrew's bank. The west wall of the bank building was just across the fence, and there was a thin crack of light below a curtained rear window. That, Randall guessed, would be Pettigrew's living quarters.

A rider charged into the north alley and, for a moment, as this man pulled to a sliding stop, Randall thought he was going to scout the wagon yard. But in the next instant Sheriff Brannon rode past, yelling loudly, "This way—this way!"

Another rider swung in from Main Street. Three more came clattering down the back alley. All followed Brannon's lead northward. Whereupon, Randall chuckled and tying his bronc to a rail, climbed the fence.

Shad Pettigrew, he felt sure, was riding hell-bent with the posse. And the banker's daughter would likely be outside with the rest of Main Street's excited citizens. The bank was closed, but the living quarters at the rear were lighted, and he guessed there'd be an inside entrance to the bank.

Quickly crossing the yard, Randall stepped to a side doorway and, seeing food on the kitchen table, remembered he hadn't eaten since breakfast.

"Maybe," he reflected, "I'll have time for a bite."

But first he had to explore the banker's desk, had to look for a letter that would brand Shad Pettigrew the brains behind the Hockaday-Benteen feud!

Out on Main Street all sorts of wild rumors were circulating.

"Randall intended to rob the bank!"

"Sheriff Brannon says Randall is a notorious Texas outlaw!"

Men on Residential Avenue strapped on their guns and hurriedly joined the throng on Main Street. Those who'd witnessed Randall's spectacular escape described it to those who hadn't. Sheriff Brannon's account of the slaughter at Raider's Gap was repeated in lurid detail, gaining dimension with each telling. Twenty, fifty, a whole herd of Rafter B cattle had been butchered by Clark Randall!

Sophie Carradine stood with Eve Pettigrew in front of the mercantile, listening to the fading hoofbeats of the departing posse. "Oh, I hope they catch him quick!" the dressmaker exclaimed. "No telling what terrible things he might do!"

"If he's such a desperate character, someone is liable to get shot catching him," Eve Pettigrew said nervously.

Sophie, who'd never liked Eve's stepfather, answered sarcastically, "You don't need to worry much. Shad Pettigrew never took a chance in his life. Someone may get hurt, but it won't be Shad."

"I'm not worrying about him," the girl declared. "He married my mother for her money and then made her life miserable. It's Sam I'm thinking of, Sophie. He's not used to gun fighting."

Sophie eyed her sharply, said, "You've certainly got a case on him, haven't you, honey?"

Then she turned to Jock Plunkett, who hobbled over from the stable. "Why didn't you grab Randall before he got on his horse?" she demanded.

"Gosh, I had no idea what he'd done," Plunkett explained. "He'd just got through sayin' what a fine gal Jane Benteen was, and all."

"Randall," Sophie scoffed, "is just a romantic renegade! He talks sweet as you please, and then shoots your cattle!"

"So they say," Plunkett muttered. "So they say."

Then he said worriedly, "Seems like somebody ought to go see if Jane is all right."

He watched quick apprehension cloud Sophie's face and added, "For all we know, Jane might been shot or somethin'. What say you and me drive out there right now, Sophie?"

"Yes," the dressmaker decided instantly. "Yes, I think we should."

Whereupon, Jock, who'd asked her to go buggy riding a dozen times without success, smiled in a thoroughly satisfied way. "I'll hook up a hoss in a jiffy," he declared and gallantly offered Sophie his arm.

Eve Pettigrew crossed the street, stopping for a brief conversation with two women in front of the bank building. When she went around to the side entrance she thought she saw someone move into the yard's deep shadows. And a moment later, as she sat down to finish the supper Sheriff Brannon had interrupted, she noticed that the apple pie was gone.

Then, in rapid succession, she noticed several things. A large portion of roast beef was missing, the inside door to the bank was propped open with a chair, and the floor near her stepfather's desk was strewn with papers!

It was nearly midnight when Jane Benteen stood in the doorway at Rafter B, watching Jock Plunkett's rig roll out of the yard. Sophie waved a white handkerchief, called, "Keep your door locked, Jane!"

The dressmaker had tried to talk her into accompanying them to town, but Plunkett hadn't urged her at all. In fact the old rascal had actually smiled when she refused. So now Jane acknowledged Sophie's warning with one of her own, calling, "Watch out for Jock, Sophie. He's a regular Romeo!"

The news of Randall's visit to San Pedro had astonished Jane. Why, she wondered, should he ride all the way to town when he was so close to Spear H? What possible reason could he have had?

And there was another angle she couldn't understand. Sheriff Brannon had left here with Sam this morning, headed for town. How had he happened to witness the cow killing at Raider's Gap, and what had prompted him to ride there, alone? There was something queer about that, and about Randall's failure to visit Spear H.

Thoroughly mystified, Jane went to bed. All that town talk about Clark Randall being a notorious Texas outlaw didn't make much sense. Just because he happened to be a friend of Tex Hockaday's didn't mean he was a bank robber. She was wondering if the posse had captured him when she finally fell asleep. And it was the first thing she thought of when she awoke the next morning. If he'd killed those cows he deserved to go to prison, but despite the fact Jane was almost certain she'd seen him near the Gap yesterday, she couldn't believe he'd done the shooting.

She went out to the woodshed, picked up an armful of mesquite branches and was turning toward the kitchen door when she saw the second saddle on the pole, glimpsed a rat-tailed roan horse in the corral!

And while she stood there with a breathless, fluttery feeling within her, Clark Randall stepped out of the bunkhouse.

"Good morning, Joan of Arc," he called, grinning.

For a moment Jane was too dumfounded to speak, think or move. She watched him make an ineffectual attempt to smooth his rumpled hair. She heard him say, "Tex didn't blast the Tabletop Mesa well, I didn't shoot your cattle, and you're going to hear me out if I have to rope and hogtie you!"

He was close now, close enough for her to see the way the scar on his cheek turned into a crooked dimple when he smiled. "I'll tell you about it while you get breakfast," he said and took the kindling wood from her arms.

Jane followed him into the kitchen, still too surprised and befuddled to think straight. While Clark built a fire she mixed biscuit batter and smiled secretively at the memory of Sophie's warning last night. "Lock your door," Sophie had suggested, but she hadn't said anything about locking her heart.

Presently, Randall came over to the table. "I was going to tell you yesterday morning that Tex didn't ask me to do anything except try to find out where his rustled cattle went. But you wouldn't listen."

Then he told her how the windlass hoist beam had given him his first real clue, how it had reminded him of the crossties he'd seen along the Texas, Arizona & Western right of way while riding through the desert.

"Remember that first day," he asked, "when you couldn't tell me why someone would want the Rafter B?"

Jane nodded.

"Well, I had a hunch right then it had something to do with the new railroad. That hoist beam made me remember a talk I'd had with the railroad's construction boss back in New Mexico. He told me crosstie timber was so scarce he'd contracted to pay five times the regular price in Apache Basin. It occurred to me yesterday that the only timber worth mentioning was in the Blackjack Hills, which was the reason somebody wanted the Rafter B."

It sounded fantastic to Jane. But because she was looking into Clark's dark eyes again and was feeling the same things she'd felt the first time she saw him, Jane wanted to believe it.

"How," she asked, "do you know Hockaday didn't make that deal with the railroad?"

Randall grinned, said, "I knew Tex wasn't that much of a schemer. It takes a different breed of galoot to figure that far ahead. It takes businessmen, like Pettigrew and Tiffany."

"Sam wouldn't have anything to do with that kind of crooked work!" Jane exclaimed.

"Mebbe not," Randall said quietly.

But Jane knew he believed Sam guilty, and she steeled herself against sharing his suspicion. Sam had urged her to sell Rafter B to Pettigrew almost from the day Big Bill had died.

Randall took a folded paper from his hip pocket, laid it on the table. "I found that in Pettigrew's desk last night. It's a contract he made with T. A. & W. almost a year ago to furnish crosstie timber beginning next December."

Jane wiped her flour-dusted hands on her apron. She was reaching for the paper when she saw Sheriff Brannon slide into the doorway, heard him call sharply, "Lift 'em, Randall, or I'll blow your backbone clean through you!"

Clark Randall didn't move and he didn't speak. But he did some swift, sharp thinking. Brannon, he guessed, was not more than six or seven feet behind him. And Jane was almost directly in front of him. Any attempt at a duck-and-dodge play would place her in the line of fire.

"I'd just as soon shoot you now as later!" Brannon snarled. "You better lift 'em, Texan!"

Then, as Shad Pettigrew came out of the living room with a Winchester cradled on his arm, Randall raised his hands. There wasn't a chance here now—no chance at all!

Shad Pettigrew's brittle eyes peered squintingly at Randall. He stood in the doorway until Brannon snatched Randall's gun from its holster. Then he stepped quickly over to the table, picked up the folded contract and tucked it inside his shirt. "A very valuable document," he mused, glancing at Jane. His gray cheeks creased into a grotesque grin and he asked, "So you'd believe me guilty of crooked work, but not Sam Tiffany, eh, girl?"

Jane ignored the question and the frugal whinny of amusement that accompanied it. She was looking at Sheriff Brannon, was thinking that this was her day for learning things. A few moments ago she'd learned how completely Clark Randall could command her respect and admiration. Now, looking at the man whose sneaking sabotage had broken Big Bill's heart, she knew how it felt to really hate. And on top of that was another emotion—fear for Clark.

Banker Pettigrew winked at Brannon, said, "Randall has a bad name in Apache Basin. A very bad name. Folks wouldn't be much surprised to hear he'd committed another crime."

The lawman chuckled and, keeping his gun aimed at Randall's belt buckle, asked tauntingly, "You didn't know I missed you on purpose last night, did you, saddle tramp? You never guessed why I kept the posse from scouting the wagon yard."

That was when a flash of understanding came to Clark Randall. There could be only one reason why this bragging lawman had wanted him to escape last night—just one reason. Brannon had needed a scapegoat for another crime, and that crime was to be the murder of Jane Benteen!

The stark realization that this was so chilled Randall to the bone. He glanced at Jane, seeing her beauty as something priceless, something for a man to cherish and protect, and knew there was no way he could save her.

Pettigrew said goadingly, "You don't talk much, Randall."

But Randall scarcely heard him. He was seeing the pallor in Jane's face, was knowing she understood the monstrous thing these men were planning to do. Yet there was no sign of fear or flinching in her gray eyes. She met his gaze for a lingering moment, her lips curving into a slow, sweet smile.

Then she glanced at Pettigrew and spoke thoughtfully, "You intend to tell people that Clark Randall killed me and that Sheriff Brannon shot Clark while he was resisting arrest. Then you will claim Rafter B on the unpaid mortgage and make a fortune out of the timber."

That seemed to surprise the hawk-faced banker. His flinty eyes blinked and he exclaimed, "You take it all-fired calm for a female!"

"What," Jane scoffed, "would you like to have me do? Cry and cringe and beg for mercy? Mercy—from you?"

The contempt, the utter loathing she put in that last word brought a fleeting grin to Randall's lips. Here was a girl with viking blood in her veins. A girl who could look death in the eye and scorn it!

But her scorn was wasted on Shad Pettigrew. The banker was a prideless, money-mad fanatic whose every instinct was tainted with rapacious greed. He winked at Brannon, said gloatingly, "I've heard tell that all Texans are fast with wimmin and guns. Let's give Randall a fighting chance. Let's put his gun on the table and invite him to grab it."

"Sure," Brannon agreed. "Anything you say, Shad."

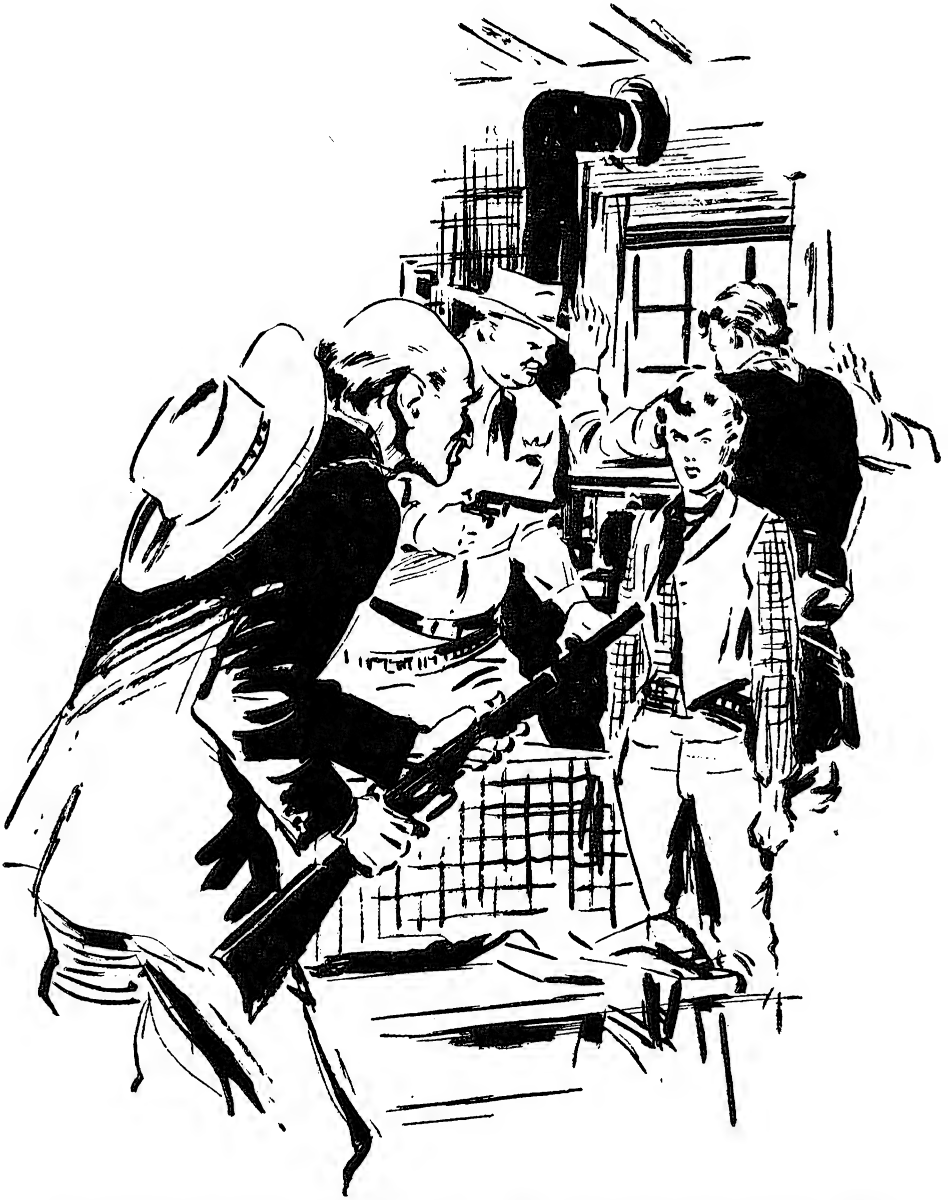
Randall watched Brannon with a searching, concentrated gaze. Here, he thought bitterly, was a political lawdog who'd used his badge to bring death and destruction into the Blackjack Hills. If he'd just grow careless for one instant there might be a chance to rush him, a chance to choke the life out of that pulpy face!

But Brannon remained warily alert as he laid the gun on the table, and when he backed away there was a gleam of anticipation in his brutish, unblinking eyes. "There you be, Texan," he grunted.

This was, Randall knew, the shabbiest kind of a come-on. Just a cat-and-mouse trick to taunt him into springing his own slaughter trap. But because Brannon halted at least three feet closer than he'd been before, Randall's mind clutched at a scheme that might give him what Pettigrew had gloatingly called a fighting chance. Not that there was any hope for his own survival, nor thought of living longer than it would take to grasp Sheriff Brannon's throat in his two hands—

Randall's voice was strictly controlled, almost casual, when he asked, "Mind if I fix up a smoke first?"

And because this was the important part of the scheme, he reached for his tobacco sack. If he opened it wide, flung the contents into Brannon's face and jumped forward at the same time, this play might



Jane stared at the hawk-faced banker. Then she answered him scornfully: "What would you like me to do? Cry and cringe and beg for mercy? Mercy—from you?" The last was uttered with contempt and loathing.

work. They wouldn't be expecting him to jump away from his gun. While Pettigrew was shooting at him, Jane would have a chance to grab the gun from the table and defend herself.

All this in the time it took Brannon to nod toward the banker and say, "He's the boss. Ask him."

"We've got no time to dawdle," Pettigrew shrilled impatiently.

There was a note of madness in the banker's voice, the kill-crazy whine of a man primed for murder.

A fanatical expression came into Pettigrew's eyes and his voice rose to a falsetto cackle when he said, "You'll get smoke, Randall—gun smoke. Make your grab!"

Discarding all hope of using the tobacco trick, Randall cocked his muscles for a desperate, last-ditch charge toward Brannon. And at this exact instant, the tromp of a running horse came plainly from the yard.

The impact of that swiftly increasing sound was like a thunderblast in the hushed room. The shock of it sent Pettigrew rushing to the kitchen window and, in that fleeting interval, a flash of hope registered in Randall's mind. The oncoming rider might be Tex Hockaday!

If it were Tex there'd be a chance here. But if it were Sam Tiffany, the odds would be three-to-one, and there'd be no chance at all.

There was a scuff of hoofs sliding to a halt, that sound pulling at Sheriff Brannon's attention. "Who's out there?" he asked, and flicked a glance toward Pettigrew.

Whereupon, Clark Randall sprang forward.

Shad Pettigrew peered cautiously through the window, then poked the barrel of his Winchester across the sill.

"Who is it?" Brannon demanded.

Pettigrew spoke and fired at the same instant, his voice lost in the rifle's sharp blast.

Randall's charge at the sheriff astonished Jane. She had sensed that he was coiled to spring, but she'd expected him to jump toward the table. Now, as he flung himself toward Brannon, she choked down a screaming protest.

For a split second, while hope and fear raced rampant through her mind, she thought Clark was going to make it, thought he'd have time to smash Brannon's gun aside. But the sheriff's glance flicked back and his gun exploded just as Randall reached it.

Jane shuddered. That bullet couldn't have missed Clark, nor the one that instantly followed it. Yet Clark didn't fall back. He fell forward, taking Brannon down with him. And Clark's hands were clutching Brannon's throat!

Abruptly, then, Jane remembered the gun on the table and rushed to it. She knew why Clark had charged Brannon, empty-handed. He'd used his body to shield her from bullets while she grabbed the gun he couldn't possibly have reached alive.

The rest of it was a tumultuous bedlam of blasting guns and cursing men, a crazy confusion of shifting shapes obscured by swirling streamers of gun smoke. Fearful of hitting Clark if she fired at Brannon, Jane aimed at Pettigrew, who was dodging toward the living-room doorway. She fired and missed, and saw Pettigrew hastily swivel the Winchester's barrel toward her.

Clark Randall yelled, "Down, Jane, down!"

She had one smoke-blurred glimpse of Clark lunging at Pettigrew, of Clark's bloody right arm reaching for the rifle's shifting snout. Then a gun began blasting behind her, those rapid explosions making one long roar of room-trapped sound.

Jane thought that Sheriff Brannon had gotten up, that he'd changed position and was firing at Clark. But when she whirled around she saw Sam Tiffany standing in the doorway with a smoking six-gun in his hand.

She cried, "Sam—oh, Sam!"

Randall had yanked the Winchester from Pettigrew's drooping hands and was aiming it at Tiffany when Jane rushed in front of him, saying hysterically, "Sam saved us, Clark! He shot Pettigrew and saved us both!"

That didn't make sense to Clark Randall, not at first. But because Jane was standing directly in front of the merchant, he lowered the rifle.

Tiffany's perspiring face was chalky. He glanced at Brannon's sprawled body, then looked at Pettigrew's grotesque shape where it lay propped against the wall. "I got suspicious of those two when they left the posse and went off alone," he said excitedly. "Then, this morning, Eve showed me a paper she'd found on the floor near her father's desk, a partnership agreement between Pettigrew and Brannon in a company they called the Apache Basin Land & Lumber Co. I knew then why Shad wanted Rafter B, and what he'd already done to get it. So I came running."

Randall grinned sheepishly. He said, "Good thing for us you did," and when Jane rolled up his sleeve to examine his wounded arm, he added, "It's just a long scratch that'll make a dandy scar."

Afterward, when they went outside, Randall remembered the joyful way Jane had called Sam's name when she'd seen him in the doorway. He said, "Reckon I'll mosey over to Spear H for a visit and then head back to Texas."

"What's all the hurry?" Jane asked in surprise.

She was standing beside Sam and the thought came to Randall that she'd make the merchant a fine wife. And because Tiffany had saved her from sure death in that smoke-fouled kitchen, Randall felt no resentment toward this blocky-faced man who was going to marry the only girl a Texas renegade ever had loved.

"Well," he said with a self-mocking grin, "where I come from three is considered a crowd. And I never was much at playing second fiddle."

"Not even with a girl who dances like a fiddler's dream?" Jane asked.

She gave Tiffany a meaning glance and said, "You can ride my horse into town if you like, Sam."

The merchant nodded, and when he turned toward the corral, Jane came over to Randall, standing so close that the scent of her hair was like a well-remembered perfume. "Sam," she murmured, "likes to live in town. He'll probably marry Eve and become a banker."

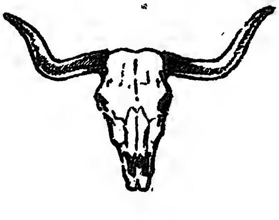
Then her lips curved into a mischievous smile and she asked, "Do I have to carry a pink parasol, Clark?"

Randall took her in his arms and asked wonderingly, urgently, "Would you marry a renegade, Joan of Arc?"

"I might," Jane whispered, "if he were a romantic renegade, and kissed me."

Which was exactly what Randall did.

THE END.



by

Richard Hill Wilkinson

A Novelette

BEN BROOKES,

It was Vicki who saw something in the depths of his gray eyes—something almost wistful that wasn't part of this hard, lean man whose name struck terror to the hearts of brave men everywhere.

Vicki was finishing the breakfast dishes when she happened to glance through the kitchen window and saw the horseman coming toward the shack. For a moment panic seized her. She knew from previous descriptions given her that the man was Ben Brookes; the wariness of his approach indicated that he expected trouble.

Panic gave way to cool calculation. Whatever else she did she must not lose her head. Larry, her brother, was over on the west range rounding up some beef for Poke Roberts, the cattle buyer. If she could somehow stall Ben Brookes and get a word of warning to Larry before—

The irregular beat of shod hoofs stopped behind the stable. Vicki hung up her dish towel and went into her bedroom. She was trembling, and a glance into a mirror showed her cheeks void of color.

"Stop that!" she told her reflection sternly. "Larry's life may depend upon you acting natural and unsuspicious."

KILLER

She had finished touching up her cheeks with rouge and rearranging her hair when she heard the knock. She took a deep breath and went out through the living room, feeling suddenly quite calm and sure of herself.

She did not at once see anyone when she opened the door. Ben Brookes had stepped back into the shadows of the lilacs. He was a tall, lean man, dressed in jeans, blue cotton shirt, black sombrero. There was a film of fine white dust over his entire costume.

He moved into the sunlight and she saw that his eyes were deeply gray and that there was a bitter hardness about his mouth. She saw, too, that one lean brown hand rested lightly on the butt of the gun at his hip.

Absurdly, she thought: "But he doesn't look like a killer. He doesn't look like a man who has ridden a hundred miles to commit murder."

If Ben Brookes was surprised at sight of the girl, his face did not show it.

"Ma'am, I'm looking for a gent named Larry Fowler."

She smiled at him brightly. "Then you've come to the right place. I'm Vicki Fowler, Larry's sister. Larry isn't in just now. I presume you must be Poke Roberts, the cattle buyer?"

Ben Brookes hesitated a bare

fraction of a second. "Yessum, I'm Roberts."

"Please come in. Larry's expecting you. He's over on the west range rounding up the beef you wanted."

He stood with his back to the door, his eyes darting about the room. His hand did not move from the gun. Vicki appeared not to notice.

"I'll make you some coffee," she said. "And I've a fresh batch of doughnuts just out of the kettle."

She moved about the room swiftly, not waiting for his reply. Fear suddenly laid a cold hand across her heart.

Ben Brookes was suspicious. She had not convinced him that she really believed him to be Poke Roberts. He would not let her out of his sight. Larry would ride blindly into his trap and be shot down in cold blood.

"Larry never told me he had a sister."

He had seated himself at the kitchen table near the window where he could command a view of the trail coming up out of the draw from the west. He had removed his hat and she saw that his hair was thick and black and wavy. He was watching her steadily and it seemed to the girl that his gray eyes were faintly mocking.

"I . . . I've been away to school."

"School?"

She bit her lip. Did Ben Brookes know that that was a lie? Did he know that for the past two years there'd been barely enough money to keep them alive, let alone an extra amount that would be needed to send her away to school?

"Yes." She faced him squarely, determined to go through with her story. "At Miss Ames' school in Tucson. I . . . I barely got started when Larry was taken sick and I had to come home and care for him. He's the only family I have."

"Think quite a lot of that brother of yours, eh?"

"Larry's the best boy and the best brother in the world," she told him proudly. And she said again: "He's all I have."

He nodded, absently putting together a cigarette. "I know how that is. I had a brother once." He flicked a match into flame, set fire to his cigarette. "Chris was a nice kid, too. He didn't deserve to die."

A little gasp escaped her lips. She saw the bright, hard gleam in his eyes and she wanted to cry out: "Oh, you fool! Larry didn't kill your brother. Larry couldn't kill anyone. He's good and clean and fine. What if he did run wild for a little while? Every boy has a right to some sort of fling. But he didn't kill your brother."

She couldn't say that though. The evidence was too damning. Facts, distorted by lying tongues, had become truths too firmly rooted to be combated.

So, instead, Vicki forced shock and pity into her voice. "How terrible!" she said. "Did your brother . . . was he killed in an accident?"

"No!" His voice was suddenly harsh with the bitterness of hate. "Chris was murdered. Shot down in cold blood, without being given a chance to defend himself."

"How awful," she said, and turned her attention to the stove, hoping he would not pursue the subject, but his voice drove at her relentlessly.

"If someone did that to your brother, ma'am, how would you feel? What would you do?"

Her head came up at that, and her eyes met his squarely.

"I'd find out the true facts before I did anything."

"I have the true facts."

"Did you see the shooting?"

"No. But there were plenty who

did. The story came to me straight from those who were present when it happened."

"And you know the man who fired the gun? You've looked into his eyes and seen murder written there?"

"I know the man," he told her stubbornly.

"And now you seek only vengeance for his death?"

His fist banged on the table. "Why shouldn't I? A murdering skunk like that has no right to live. Society has no place for him."

"Vengeance is such a pitiful reward for the suffering it usually causes," she told him. "Will you be happy after you have . . . murdered the killer of your brother? Will you feel you have done the thing that your brother would have wanted?"

"I'll have done what I think is right." But his eyes were suddenly brooding with past memories, and Vicki, her heart suddenly beating fast with hope, said:

"Chris would have wanted you to give this man you seek a chance. He had no chance himself, you say; would he want it that way for others?"

"The man I seek will have his chance."

"A chance to fight you at your own game, you mean. A chance to fight with guns." And suddenly she laughed in bitter scorn. Her blue eyes were agleam with taunting, mocking lights. "How noble of you, Ben Brookes! How brave and gallant! You, who make your living hiring out your guns to kill other people. You, whose reputation as the fastest man on the draw is known from one end of the State to the other, prattling on about giving the man you seek a chance. How generous! Is that the way you ease your conscience and make your peace with your Maker for the rotten way you live, Mr. Gun Fighter?"

She finished on a high, fierce note, leaning tensely forward, her eyes defiant and jeering and accusing. Every inch of her condemned him for what she believed him to be.

Ben Brookes rose slowly, his mouth a thin, tight line.

"I thought as much. You knew I wasn't Roberts all the time."

"Knew?" she cried recklessly. "Of course I knew. Is there a man or woman within a hundred miles of here who hasn't heard of Killer Ben Brookes? Is there a mother who hasn't frightened her children with a description of the man who makes his living trading on human lives?"

Resentment rose in him, yet in the depths of his gray eyes something stirred and lived that was not part of the hard, lean man whose reputation could strike terror to the hearts of brave men everywhere. It was something human, something almost wistful. A longing, perhaps, a yearning for something that his starved soul had always wanted, yet had always been denied.

He looked at the girl for a long minute and she saw the muscles about his mouth working, as though by effort he were controlling a desire to speak. He opened his mouth at last, but the words he might have said were never uttered.

From outside at that moment there came the beat of running horses. The girl suddenly stiffened, flung her head toward the window and then ran to it and looked out. The man came and stood behind her.

The girl muttered, as though forgetting his presence: "Lawson!" She ran to the mantel behind the stove and took down a carbine that was hanging there.

Without a glance at her visitor, she flung open the door and stepped out into the sunlight. Ben Brookes moved to the open door, but remained hidden in the shadows, watching.

Four horsemen had drawn up in the dust before the shack. They were hard-looking citizens, heavily armed, obviously bent on no mission of good will. Amusement lighted their faces at sight of the girl with the gun.

"Far enough, Ace Lawson! Ride on! There's nothing here for you!" Vicki Fowler's voice rang out sharp and clear and defiant. The leader of the pack of four, obviously the man named Lawson, laughed softly and turned to wink at his companions.

"Now, now, ma'am, that ain't no way to treat your brother's friends who've just dropped by to pay a friendly call."

"None of you are friends of my brother. You hate him and fear him because he won't play your rotten game of crime. Move on before I remind myself what a service I'd be doing society by pulling the trigger of this gun."

"Boys," declared Ace Lawson in mock seriousness, "do you hear what the little lady says? Threatens to shoot us down in cold blood. Must run in the family. Now take that brother of hers, you can understand cold-blooded murder in a man, but hardly—"

The carbine in Vicki's hand suddenly exploded. A bullet went whining and singing past the ear of Ace Lawson. The horses on which the pack of four sat started nervously. Blue smoke eddied up in the still, hot air.

"That's my warning. The next shot finds a target. Move on!"

Ace Lawson's face was suddenly black with anger.

"Why, you damned she-killer! I'll show you what happens to anyone who dares defy Ace Lawson!" He jerked his sorrel sidewise. "Fan out, boys. Move in quick. She can't get us all. Let her have a slug right between the eyes if she shoots again."

Lawson's men moved swiftly, systematically, as if they had played this sort of game many times before.

Vicki Fowler swung her gun toward one and then another, and found panic rising within her, felt sudden stark terror tugging at her.

Behind her she heard a step. A voice that was soft and deadly drifted past her ears.

"You heard the lady. You're in far enough. Move on!"

Astonishment swept across the face of Ace Lawson. He jerked his horse up short, and his black, shoe-button eyes cast one startled, suspicious glance toward the shack's doorway, then came back uncertainly to the face of the tall stranger.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded.

"Never mind," Ben Brookes told him levelly. "I'm here to back the lady's play. Thirty seconds go by awful quick, mister."

Uncertainty showed briefly on Lawson's pudgy face. He exchanged swift glances with his men. Were others in the shack? This stranger talked smooth and seemed sure of himself. Lawson did not want to make the mistake of calling a play when the odds were even.

"Stay out of this, hombre. You'll get hurt." He added in a blustering, half-warning tone: "You're up against four of the fastest gunslingers in this man's country. And you're only one."

"I'll take my chances," said Ben Brookes firmly. "Twenty of the thirty seconds have gone."

In the brief, throbbing instant that followed, no one moved. Time itself seemed to stand still. Doubt and uncertainty still lingered on the faces of the quartet of riders, yet anger was there, too, and a belligerent sort of bravado.

Waiting, Vicki Fowler felt as though she were some other person, watching this terrible drama as from a great distance. And then she heard behind the shack the pound of a horse's hoofs, and a moment later a rider came into sight around a corner.

One of the pack of four cried hoarsely: "There's the little rat now! Get him!"

And a gun blasted out on the still, hot air. Young Larry Fowler, fair-haired and blue-eyed, jerked in his saddle and blank astonishment came to his face as he pitched slowly sidewise.

Vicki screamed and started running toward her brother, not knowing that in crossing in front of Ben Brookes she stopped his guns from speaking and gave the horsemen a chance to get underway.

Their mission accomplished, Lawson and his men were now interested only in escape. They fired aimlessly toward the kneeling Ben Brookes and sank home their spurs. In split seconds they were off, bent low, racing toward sheltering brush twenty-five yards away.

Ben Brookes' gun spoke at last and one of the four slumped forward, but clutched the horn of his saddle and clung there. An instant later all four had disappeared from view.

Vicki Fowler was on her knees beside the still form of her brother. She turned a tear-stained face upward as Ben Brookes moved across the yard and stood above them.

"They've killed him! They shot him down without a chance!"

Brookes dropped to his knees and tore open the boy's shirt. He explored the wound gently.

"Not dead," he said. "Not hurt bad at all." And, somehow, there was exultancy in his tone. He picked the boy up and carried him into the house and laid him on a couch there.

Vicki Fowler brought hot water, bandages and antiseptic. Together they dressed the wound.

"You . . . you don't think he'll die?"

"Not a chance."

Ben Brookes stood up and looked down at the fair-haired boy and the gleam of triumph was still in his eyes. At that moment Larry Fowler stirred and muttered, then opened his eyes. For a moment he stared blankly at the two above him.

Vicki dropped to her knees beside the couch and cried softly, "Larry! Larry! It's all right."

The boy's mouth twisted into a grin. "Hello, sis. That was a close one, eh? I expect sometime Lawson will get me sure." He turned his face toward Ben Brookes and said: "Howdy, mister. I expect you're Poke Roberts?"

Brookes shook his head and said, "No, I'm not Roberts." He glanced toward the girl and found her eyes watching him. It was as if she suddenly had remembered who he was and why he was here and there was fear in the look she gave him; fear and a horrible sort of understanding. She said, still looking at Brookes:

"Larry, this man is Ben Brookes. He's come to kill you for shooting his brother."

Larry Fowler's eyes widened and the twisted smile returned to his lips. "So that's it, eh? Kept me from dying so's you wouldn't be cheated in your purpose." The boy laughed softly, a weary, ironic laugh, as though now that this thing he had feared for so many months had come to pass, he was glad the waiting was over. "Well," he said, "go ahead and shoot." His eyes were steady and without fear. "You'll find I can take it all right."

Ben Brookes swore softly. "I

don't play the game that way, sonny. I don't shoot men in cold blood, like some I know. In a week's time you'll be up and about, able to handle a gun."

Vicki Fowler closed here eyes for a moment. It wasn't real. It was a dream, this cold-blooded, matter-of-fact talk of life and death. She cried out desperately, looking up at Ben Brookes: "Oh, you fool! Can't you see that Larry's innocent? Can't you see he isn't capable of killing anyone?"

"All I can see, ma'am, is my kid brother Chris lying cold and still with the blood on his shirt and the bullet in his heart. Chris was young and good. I kept him that way. He had a heap to live for."

"Then you must know that Larry is innocent. You *must!*" She was pleading now, desperate, half hysterical. Words tumbled from her lips uncontrolled. "Ace Lawson killed your brother. They were playing cards and your brother won. He won too much money to satisfy Lawson. Lawson ambushed him that night; shot him and took the money."

Ben Brookes said harshly: "You're lying! You're saying that to save the kid here. You've no proof."

"I have!" Her eyes were wildly agleam. "We have the proof, only up to now we've been afraid of what Lawson would do if we talked. Everyone's afraid of Lawson. He's a killer, cruel and ruthless. But now it doesn't matter. He came today to murder my brother, so now it doesn't matter. I'm going to talk!"

"Sis! Stop it! If Lawson knows you talked he'll . . . he'll—"

The boy had half risen, but now fell back with a gasp.

Ben Brookes looked down at him and said tightly, "Shut up, kid!" And his flint-hard eyes lifted to the girl again. "Go on," he said.

"Larry wasn't even in Jarales that day. He was down in Mescal with a lawyer and real-estate man named Willey—Duke Willey. Willey had a client who owned this ranch and needed money badly. Larry and I had saved up a little and Larry wanted me to have a home, so he and Willey went down to see the client about buying the place."

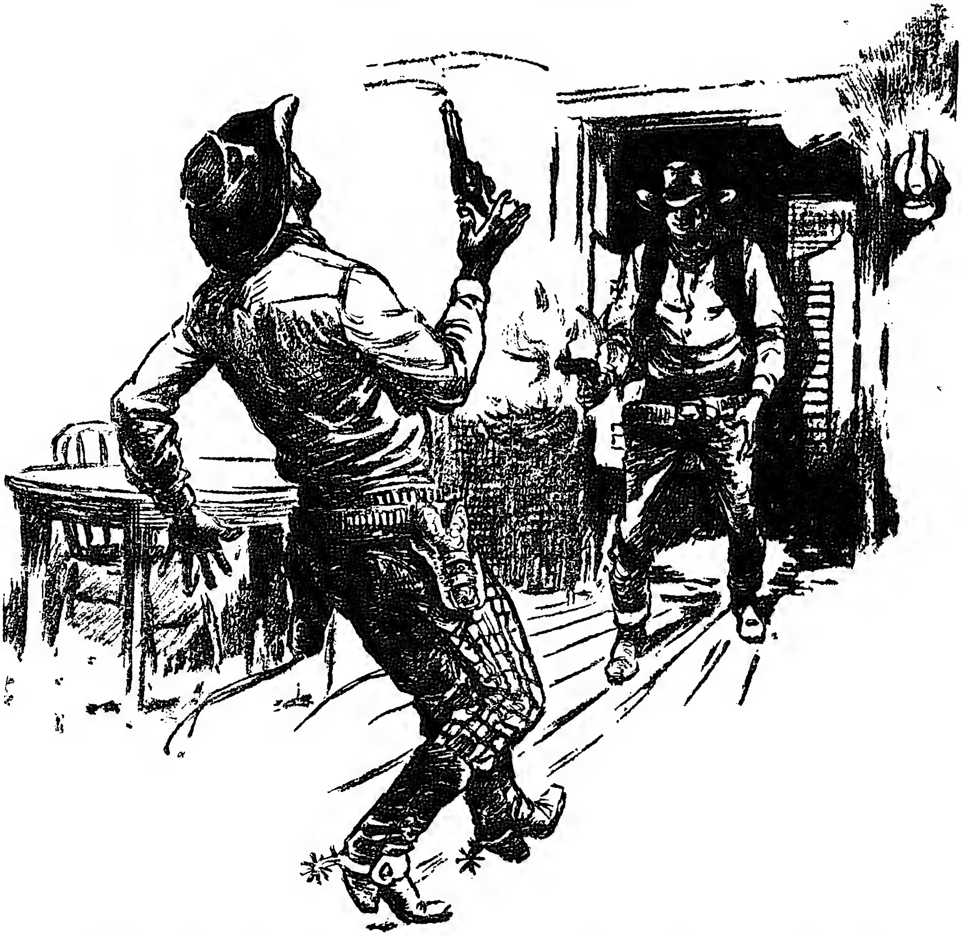
"It don't hold water," Ben Brookes said coldly. "Why didn't Willey clear the kid's name?"

"Because Lawson would kill him if he did and Willey knows it. Like everyone else around here, he's afraid of Lawson." Her eyes flicked to the bed for an instant and then returned to Ben Brookes' face. "When Lawson shot your brother he didn't know who he was; didn't know he was the brother of . . . of the famous Ben Brookes. He found that out after a while and then he heard you'd taken up the trail of Chris' murderer and he got scared. He figured that somehow you might learn who the killer was. So he gave out the story that it was Larry who did the shooting. Everyone believed him because they were afraid not to. And it added up. Larry was out of town that day, with Duke Willey. And . . . and—"

"Well?"

Tears stung the girl's eyes, but she lifted her head proudly. "Larry used to run around with the Lawson crowd. He got a kick out of being with the big shots. Then he learned that Lawson was an outlaw and a killer and he quit. Lawson didn't like that. He figured that Larry might talk. He figured he knew too much, and when this Chris Brookes business came up he . . . he saw a good chance to get rid of him."

Vicki's cheeks were pale when she finished. She sank into a chair and began to cry softly. Larry Fowler looked up at the tall man with wide, startled eyes. The whole story was



Brookes laughed softly. "Yank out your hardware, Lawson. Take the chance you didn't give Chris and be thankful you're getting it." Lawson's finger contracted on the trigger and the gun exploded, blending with the crash of Ben Brookes' weapon.

out now. When Lawson heard—

Ben Brookes walked to a window and stood looking out at the sun-drenched desert. A thousand thoughts were hammering at his brain and there was a conflict of emotion within his heart that brought angry lights to his eyes.

He turned and found both brother and sister staring at him with half-hopeful, half-fearful eyes. He moved across the floor and stood before the girl.

"Where's this Duke Willey now?"

"In Gunsight, the town that lies beyond the next ridge." She added: "You can't make him talk. He's afraid."

"He'll talk." Ben Brookes' lips tightened grimly. He glanced down at the boy on the couch. "Don't make the mistake of trying a get-away. It won't work."

Outside, he tightened the cinch buckle on his gray and heard the rear door of the shack slam. The girl was coming toward him and he waited. She met his level, questioning gaze and her eyes were no longer condemning.

"Whatever happens," she said, "I . . . I want to thank you for . . . for what you're doing." And when he made no comment, she added: "I'm sorry for the things I said."

He shook his head at that, as though in irritation. "No mind. A man gets a reputation and he can't live it down. The stories about him build up till they become a burden he can't get out from under."

She saw the brooding look in his eyes and his loneliness reached out to her. She saw how cruel people were. She saw how he had been driven to his lonely existence. She saw how he had been forced to live apart from normal men, and suddenly she understood his passionate fondness for the boy Chris and of the longing in him to keep Chris untouched by the thing that had scarred his own life.

Impulsively, she laid a hand on his arm. "I understand," she said. "I understand, and I'm sorry. Does that help?"

He looked at her for a long minute and there was a momentary softening of the lines of his face. There was a yearning and a wanting of something that all men crave and need to make their lives complete.

Abruptly, he shook his head again, and the hard lines returned to his face. He strode away from her and stepped into the saddle and rode out of the yard without once looking back.

II.

It was almost dark when Ben Brookes reached Gunsight. Lights from saloons and stores softened the town's harsh lines. He stopped when the cluster of buildings began to thicken, and left his gray beneath a cottonwood tree and went on afoot.

The streets were deserted because it was the supper hour, and the few people he saw regarded him only with idle curiosity. At the hitch rack, before the Full House Saloon, he saw horses and recognized three of them as belonging to the riders who had appeared at the Fowler ranch earlier in the day.

Ben Brookes put together a cigarette, lighted it and stood in the shadows across the way from the saloon. The heat of the day came up from the dusty street and struck against his face and rose still higher to meet the cooling breeze of evening coming down from the hills. Above the saloon were a line of lighted windows, and on one of these Ben Brookes read the words:

DUKE WILLEY
ATTORNEY AT LAW–REAL ESTATE

He saw the head and shoulders of a man seated at a desk. His eyes found the doorway that opened on the stairs leading to the offices above.

He drew deeply on his cigarette, then ground it out with his heel and moved unhurriedly across the street. The stairs were dark, but light coming from the frosted glass door of the law office illuminated the hall above. Ben Brookes opened the door, stepped swiftly inside and closed it behind him. He moved along the wall and drew the shade at the front window without showing himself to the street below.

The man at the desk had half risen with an angry exclamation on his lips, but the words died there and his eyes bugged a little, for Brookes had a gun in his hand and its muzzle was pointed at a spot directly between the lawyer's eyes.

Brookes said: "I want to make no mistake. Your name Willey?"

Duke Willey moistened his lips. He was a short, thickset man with a red face and soft, flabby skin. He had a weak mouth and a craftiness about his expression.

"I'm Willey," he said. "Who are you?"

"Brookes is the name. Ben Brookes. I came down here to get the hombre who murdered my brother. They tell me you're the man."

Willey's eyes leaped wide open and he jerked erect in his chair, and for a moment there was a false sort of bravado in his manner because of the injustice of the accusation.

"Whoever told you that's crazy! I never heard of you nor knew you had a brother."

"That's one strike against you. You knew because there were witnesses who saw you there. Talk fast, Willey, if you want to live, and this time tell the truth."

Duke Willey's eyes darted to the door, measuring the distance, and he thought of the gun lying in the top drawer of his desk and of the men in the saloon beneath them who would come to his rescue if he could only get them word. But he had the courage to attempt none of these things because he was a coward at heart. He looked into the steady eyes of Ben Brookes and felt fear in his stomach like a tight, cold knot.

"I didn't kill your brother," he said hoarsely. "You can't shoot me down in cold blood for something I never did."

"My brother Chris was shot down in cold blood."

"But you've got to give me a chance. You've got to let me prove I didn't do it."

"You've got thirty seconds to do just that."

Duke Willey swallowed hard, and perspiration oozed out on his forehead. He remembered stories he'd heard about this Ben Brookes, and knew he couldn't expect much mercy. He wondered who had accused him of the crime, and thought how ironic it was that he had gone unpunished for a score of crimes in his past and now he was about to die for one he hadn't committed.

Panicky desperation seized him because he could think of nothing that would convince this gunman of his innocence. And then, suddenly, something clicked in his mind and a wild hope beat in his heart.

"I can prove it!" he cried in sudden exultance. "I can prove I wasn't within a hundred miles of Jarales the night your brother was killed. There was a kid I was trying to sell a ranch to. His name's Larry Fowler. He lives out on the Red Canyon road a piece with his sister. Him and me was down in Mescal that day, talking to a client. The kid will tell you that. He wouldn't lie. Not that kid. Nor his sister either."

The lawyer kept on talking, words tumbling over themselves in his eagerness to get them out, to drive home the fact that he had the proof of his innocence. But suddenly the words trailed off and he stared at the man across the room in wonder and curiosity.

A smile was tugging at Ben Brookes' mouth and there was a queer, bright light in his eyes.

"O. K., rat, you've talked enough. I ought to plug you anyhow for not clearing that kid's name before this." Ben Brookes jerked open a door and found that it led to a storage closet. He motioned with his gun. "Get in there!"

Realizing he had been trapped, but not knowing quite why, Duke Willey blustered: "Wait a minute, now. You're not going to pull any fast ones on me. Now—"

Ben Brookes' gun arced through the air and struck the lawyer glancingly on the side of the head. He went down like a log. Brookes hauled him into the closet and locked the door. "I don't know," he muttered, "why I didn't crack your skull wide open, mister. I don't know. Maybe I'm getting soft."

He went softly down the stairs and through the twin doors of the saloon. The three men he was looking for were seated at a table over to the left, eating their supper. Others were nearby, and no one paid any heed to the stranger who ranged up to the bar's end and stood with his back to the wall where he could command a view of the entire room.

"Lawson!"

Ace Lawson looked up, a forkful of food half raised, and the men beside him looked up, too, and a sudden hush fell upon the room.

Ace Lawson blinked and then swore as recognition came, and got to his feet, spilling his chair to the floor.

"It's the ranny who plugged Kip. Boys, get him!"

"The first man," said Ben Brookes, "who makes a pass at his gun will taste lead." And, somehow, those listening understood that this man meant what he said and could back up his words. They sat frozen in their chairs. Ben Brookes said: "The name is Brookes, Lawson. Ben Brookes. Ever hear of me?"

Ace Lawson's eyes opened wide and he started perceptibly.

"So yuh got down here at last, did yuh, Brookes? Well, you got a bum steer, somewheres. The man you want ain't here. It's the kid out at the Fowler ranch that's your man. If yuh hadn't been so damned smart this morning we would have saved you the trouble of doing what yuh came down here to do."

"No," said Ben Brookes evenly, "it isn't the kid I want, Lawson, it's you. There's a lawyer man upstairs who just dug a grave for you, Lawson. The trouble with you, my friend, is that you weren't smart enough to surround yourself with men who had any more courage than yourself. When cornered, they show yellow. Take these rats sitting there at the table. If it weren't for the fact that I've got men posted at the front windows, covering them, they'd probably throw down on me, since the odds are three to one."

The pair at the table exchanged startled glances and cast looks back toward the windows, and doubt showed on their faces.

Ben Brookes laughed softly. "You see, Lawson, they're yellow. They aren't even willing to call my bluff by taking a chance. You're yellow, too, Lawson. You've been running this town by bullying and by bluff. You haven't the nerve of a gnat. But right now, from somewhere, you've got to dream up a jiggerful of courage, or die in cold blood the way my brother died.

"Yank out your hardware, Lawson. Take the chance you didn't give Chris and be thankful you're getting it. Go on! Pull your iron!"

Hideous fear showed on Ace Lawson's face. Suddenly, for the first time in his life, he was confronted by something he couldn't cope with because the odds were even. Suddenly, he knew that his only chance of coming out of this alive was to accept the challenge which Ben Brookes had flung into his teeth. He had implanted in the minds of the people of this town the fact that he was fast with a gun and had lived and thrived on that false reputation. Now he was faced with his own treachery.

Desperation lent speed to his hand. He swore and flung out his left arm in a swooping arc, which was a trick he had of diverting attention. At the same time his right hand closed over the butt of his gun and yanked it clear and his finger contracted on the trigger.

The gun exploded, blending with

the crash of Ben Brookes' weapon. The bullet from Brookes' gun hit Lawson with a terrible, shocking impact, swung him around.

Blankness came to Lawson's face and his eyes rolled upward and his knees buckled. A horrible, gurgling sound rattled in his throat, and he pitched across the table and rolled off it, crashing to the floor, where he lay still.

Ben Brookes looked down at the dead man and his lip curled contemptuously. He glanced indifferently at the hole in the floor not two inches from the toe of his boot that Lawson's shot had made, and looked up and into the terrified eyes of the ex-outlaw's henchmen.

"You rats!" he said. "Get out of town. This place has been fouled by you long enough. Get out and don't come back!"

There was a mad scramble as the pair broke for the door. A moment later there was a clatter of shod hoofs, fading in the distance.

Ben Brookes resheathed his gun. He saw the relieved, grateful expressions on the faces of the men he passed on his way to the door. He went out into the cool night air and walked toward the cottonwood tree where he had left his gray.

As he neared the tree, his pace quickened, and the smile on his lips was suddenly wide and eager. For the first time in years he felt lightness in his heart and peace in his soul. For the first time he rode forth eagerly to a destination of warmth and kindness.

The gray was running at full gallop when the friendly lights of the Fowler ranch finally showed through the darkness ahead.

THE END.

* * * * * * * *

SPRING

With winter snows that pass
When wintry winds are still,
The narrative of grass
Is green against a hill.

Unwarned that dreams are old,
The past a history,
The crocus blooms unfold
Their springtime's mystery.

Yet blizzards are subdued
With frosty days declined.
Love should have long renewed
The springtide of the mind.

Mario Speracio.

FOREST

The story of a gal who took her brother's job on the home front while he continued on in the southwest Pacific and a man who felt no woman could do a man's job.

I.

From the many-windowed room atop the forty-foot lookout tower, Rhoda Gentry surveyed the fog-shrouded world around her. Bob Gentry, Rhoda's brother, had been the forest-service lookout on Hardscrabble Peak for five summers, but this summer Bob was somewhere in the southwest Pacific and Rhoda was doing her best to fill his place.

The hands on the small forest-service clock pointed to seven

RANGER OF DEER LICK

A Novelette

by Marjorie Green

o'clock just as the phone rang the morning assembly call. Rhoda lifted the receiver, said, "Hardscrabble," and waited while the rest of the lookouts and guards checked in. She wondered what Joel Price, the protective assistant on the Deer Lick District, would have her do today.

"How's the weather on top this morning?"

Expecting Joel's familiar drawl, Rhoda felt her pulses leap as Garth Madden's voice came over the wire.

"Looks as if this is the perfect day to get some of the work on your job lists out of the way. How about you, Rhoda? Is there some easy job on Bob's list you might be able to handle?"

"I can handle any of them," she said. "Joel is anxious to get the closure signs up on Little Mary and Bobwhite Creeks. I can post them this morning."

"That's a man's job." The ranger's voice blotted it off her list. "What's the next one?"

"The sign posting is the most important," she protested. "I told Joel I'd attend to it the first foggy morning. Bob brought the signs up here before he left."

"You can't do it, Rhoda. There's no use insisting. Let's see—you might spend a couple of hours raking up the chips and bark where the crew cut that wood tree."

Her chin became firm. Here it was again, as it had been ever since she came to Hardscrabble—his calm assurance that she was incapable of handling a real job!

"When Bob asked you to give me this lookout job he didn't expect me to duck out of any tough assignments," she said curtly. "I'd like your permission to leave the station long enough to post those two creeks."

She could sense his irritation, could almost see the way his blue eyes were snapping.

"I suppose you've already figured a way to cross Snow River?" He made no attempt to conceal his annoyance.

"If I get the signs up, it isn't important how I do it."

"Very well!" He bit the words off. "See that you're back at the lookout by the time this fog lifts."

She hung up the receiver with a firm hand, but her brown eyes were troubled. Why must she always lose her temper when she talked to Garth Madden? She yanked the dish pan off its nail and prepared to wash her few breakfast dishes. She'd be a lot better off if she'd forget once and for all everything about Garth Madden except that he was the district ranger and she was just one of his lookouts.

She finished the dishes and got ready to leave the station. As she was fastening the sheathed hand ax to the belt of her Levis, she heard a car climbing the grade. It topped the rise and she eyed it inhospitably as she recognized Gwen Gilbert's blue roadster.

Rhoda never had liked the snooty daughter of the forest supervisor and the fact that Gwen and her mother were spending the summer at the nearby Gilbert ranch was not calculated to make her summer on Hardscrabble any easier. The forest was closed to all recreation. There was to be no picnicking, no camping, no fishing, hunting, hiking nor riding within the confines of the national forest, and it was part of Rhoda's job to see that these restrictions were not violated. Already, she had heard whispers that Gwen was going just about where she pleased.

She watched the slim, golden-haired girl step out of the roadster and walk toward the lookout. Rumor had it she was engaged to Garth Madden. Rhoda hoped fervently it was only a rumor. She opened the door as Gwen reached the top of the stairs.

"Good morning." Her voice was neither friendly nor unfriendly. "Come in out of this chilly fog."

"Thanks." Gwen dropped into a chair near the stove. "I'm on my way to meet the bus. My sister and the kids are coming for a visit. I thought I'd let you know so that if you happened to meet them on the road sometime, you'd know it was all right."

"That's kind of you," Rhoda said, wondering what was behind Gwen's sudden thoughtfulness. She added jokingly, "I suppose I should ask to see your permit to travel inside the closed area. You do have one?"

"Oh, my, yes. I bet you'd report me if I didn't." Gwen's violet eyes regarded Rhoda approvingly. "I told Garth he wouldn't be making any mistake if he hired you."

Something inside Rhoda froze. "The only reason Garth gave me this job was that Bob convinced him I could handle it."

"But he wanted another person's opinion, too." Gwen's slender eyebrows lifted. "He feels he can trust my judgment."

"How nice." Rhoda was beginning to see the reason behind Gwen's unexpected visit. "And did he send you here to check up to see if your judgment was correct?"

"No, he didn't. But I think a ranger's wife should take an interest in her husband's work, don't you?"

Rhoda bit her lip. "I certainly do. She should remember, too, she's supposed to set an example for the residents of her husband's district."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just this. You know the army has closed the forest to all recreation. Permits to enter are given only to persons owning property or having urgent business inside the closed area. I'm not saying I believe it, Gwen, but I've heard gossip that you are going just about where you please. As the supervisor's daughter and the ranger's . . . uh . . . fiancée, you, of all people, should be careful of your actions."

Eyes blazing, Gwen jumped to her feet. "It's none of your business where I go! You'd better be careful or you'll be losing your precious job one of these days."

Rhoda fought to hold her rising temper. "We're at war, Gwen," she said quietly. "The time for selfish thinking is past. Everyone is going to have to give up something to help win this war. In past summers you've ridden, hiked, fished and picnicked all over this forest. Maybe that's the thing you will have to give up. The co-operation of these loggers and miners means everything to Garth. He's got to depend on them in case of fire. If . . . if you love Garth, you should be willing to live by the same rules he has to ask these miners and their families to live by!"

"You're wasting your breath," Gwen snapped. "Garth knows I'd never do anything to cause him any trouble."

"You'll cause him plenty of it if these folks become mad at him," Rhoda said bluntly.

A flush spread over Gwen's smooth cheeks. "I didn't come here to have you tell me how I should act." She grasped the doorknob. "You've been trying to get Garth Madden to notice you ever since he came to Deer Lick. Now, I suppose you think you can turn him against me by telling him a lot of lies some dumb logger or miner thought up." She gave a scornful laugh.

"Well, that won't get you anywhere with Garth. To him you're just a pair of eyes in a tower. I doubt if he even remembers they belong to a girl!" She went out and down the steps, and the dull ache in Rhoda's heart turned to a pain so sharp as to be almost unbearable, because she knew that Gwen was telling the truth. She didn't mean a thing to Garth Madden and there was small hope that she ever would.

A ray of sunshine broke through the fog. With a sigh Rhoda picked up her diary, made a note of Gwen's visit and wrote down the time of her own departure on the sign-posting job. Pulling a soft felt hat over her short brown curls, she picked up the roll of signs and left the lookout.

It was no task at all to post Bobwhite Creek, a foot log enabling her to cross the river without difficulty. But Little Mary Creek, half a mile down the river and separated from Bobwhite by an insurmountable cliff of bare rock, presented a major problem. There were two ways of reaching it, wading the waist-deep, icy water or jumping from rock to rock at the head of a noisy riffle.

Rhoda chose the latter and made it across by a narrow squeak, almost losing her balance on a damp rock in the middle of the stream. The signs posted, she allowed herself a moment of gloating. Guess that would prove to Garth Madden she could handle the jobs on her list! She resheathed the ax and started on the return trip.

She jumped the first two rocks easily and poised for the longer leap to the wet one. Just as she took off, a horse snorted from the bank in front of her. Rhoda started, her foot struck the rock at an angle and down she went into the icy water. She floundered to her feet, thoroughly soaked. Fury raced through her as she saw Garth Madden amusedly eying her from the back of his big bay horse. She almost choked in her effort to swallow the angry words that rushed to her lips.

"Well, yo-your si-signs are p-posted!" she finally ground out between chattering teeth. She splashed to the bank. "W-when I have a j-job to do, I d-do it!"

"So I see." He was a big man, black-haired, blue-eyed, skin bronzed by days of exposure to the sun and wind. Wet and shivering though she was, angry at his intrusion, Rhoda couldn't keep her heart from turning cartwheels when he smiled down at her.

"You'd better get to the lookout as soon as you can," he said concernedly. "You're apt to catch cold."

"I . . . I'll be all right." She gritted her teeth to stop their chattering. "You thought I couldn't post these creeks, didn't you? That's why you're here!" She glared at the bulging saddlebags behind his saddle.

"You must have left the station just after check call. You thought you'd show me up by riding across the river and doing the job you were convinced I couldn't do!" Water spurted from her shoe as she stamped her foot at him. "Why can't you treat me like any other lookout? Do I look helpless to you?"

He shifted in the saddle. "Right now you look more like a half-drowned muskrat than anything I can think of." He grinned. "You're kind of cute, so wet and so mad and so doggone stubborn!"

"Oh!" She clenched her fists. "Stop making fun of me! I . . . I wish you'd fall in the river and . . . and freeze there!" She shoved the brush aside and sloshed back to her car.

Gwen could have Garth Madden for all she cared. A man who'd laugh at a girl when she'd almost drowned while doing something for him wasn't the kind of man she'd pick to fall in love with. She was through with Garth Madden forever!

A few hours later, she saw him riding toward the tower. A thrill shot through her, but she stifled it sternly. But, for some reason, she felt impelled to give her appearance a hasty check-up in the small mirror. By the time she had finished, the ranger was dismounting at the hitch rack.

She watched him tie his horse and turn slowly, his gaze taking in everything on the ground. Her chin lifted. Evidently, she was in for the first of the season's regular inspections.

He walked over to the weather shelter, opened the door and inspected the hygrothermograph. He lifted the brake on the wind gauge, closed the switch and listened to the buzzer. He moved toward the garage, favoring the fuel moisture sticks with a probing glance as he passed. He poked into first one place and another.

Rhoda, watching him hovering over the fire-tool cache, was aware of a mounting indignation. He was being unnecessarily thorough, it seemed to her. She'd been present when other rangers had given Bob inspections and they'd never been so particular.

After he looked in the back of her coupé and satisfied himself that the one-man fire-fighting outfit was in place, he came over to the tower.

"I hope you're finding everything in order," Rhoda said icily. "I assure you everything's in place up here and I'm prepared to take any test you care to give me."

A twinkle crept into his eyes. "You are an exemplary lookout, I'm sure." He dropped his hat on the bunk. "Suppose we try a shot on the firefinder? I'd like to see if you're as capable at spotting fires as you are at posting signs."

"I'm stupendous!" she declared. "What shall I pick for a target?"

"You might," he said, "try that thin column of smoke just now rising above Long Ridge."

She whirled, her breath catching in a gasp of dismay. Biting her lip, she spun the firefinder until the horsehair was squarely on the smoke. Grabbing a lookout report, she began scribbling down her reading:

"Local landmarks: Head of Stony Creek, northwest of Long Ridge. Azimuth: 352 degrees, 6 minutes." She shifted her vertical sight and wrote: "Minus 15 minutes. Distance: 9½ miles." She ran her finger along the tape across the firefinder map to where her line of sight crossed Upper Stony Creek. Quickly, she wrote in the township, range and section, and filled in the type of smoke, a gray column drifting from the east.

She reached for the telephone, but as her fingers touched the crank, the bell rang the headquarters ring. Rhoda got the receiver to her ear in time to hear the Bear Butte lookout reporting the smoke. Her fingers tightened on the receiver.

"I'm on here, too, Joel," she cut in as soon as the lookout stopped talking. "I was just starting to call you when the phone rang. Here's my reading."

"O. K.," Joel said after she gave him the data. "You two watch that smoke, and if there's any material change let me know. I'll call the State ranger. I think it's on State land."

"Tell him I'm here if he needs

me for any reason," Garth Madden cut in. Then, as Rhoda turned from the phone: "That was good work. You got that report in in excellent time."

She eyed him resentfully. "I'd have seen that smoke before Bear Butte if you hadn't been here."

"If you hadn't been so intent on ribbing me you'd have seen it anyway." He grinned and, despite her irritation, Rhoda found herself grinning back at him.

"Thanks," she said. "Knowing your opinion of girl lookouts, that's real praise."

He picked up her diary, casually glanced through it and put it down. "I'm not against girl lookouts. I do think most of the field work is too strenuous for them. Take this smoke you just reported. If it had been a couple of miles this side of Long Ridge it would have been on forest land. There are no trails. It would mean strapping on a one-man outfit and taking out cross country. Although this station is nearest to Long Ridge, Joel would have to send a smoke-chaser from some other station. A lot of valuable time might be lost."

She faced him squarely. "My brother was lookout here for five years. He took action on a lot of fires. He's taking action on another firing line now. While he's out there doing that bigger, tougher job, I aim to fill his place in the line at home. All my life I've ridden and hiked over these hills. If smoke shows in my territory, I'm ready to take action just the same as Bob would if he were here."

"I believe you mean that." He looked at her wonderingly.

"Every word of it. This—well, this is more than just a job to me. It . . . it's sort of a trust. A charge to keep till Bob comes home again. If you could only see, I . . . I've got to do this job because he expects me to."

"I do see." His hand touched hers for a moment and her pulses jumped crazily. "You're doing a swell job, Rhoda. Bob couldn't do any better." His grin flashed. "I won't argue with you any more. From now on it's your job. I can see you are going to do all right."

She flushed with pleasure. "I'm glad you feel that way. I've hated going against your orders so much but I'm sure I can do the work."

"I'm sure, too." He turned toward the window as the sound of a car climbing the grade came up to them.

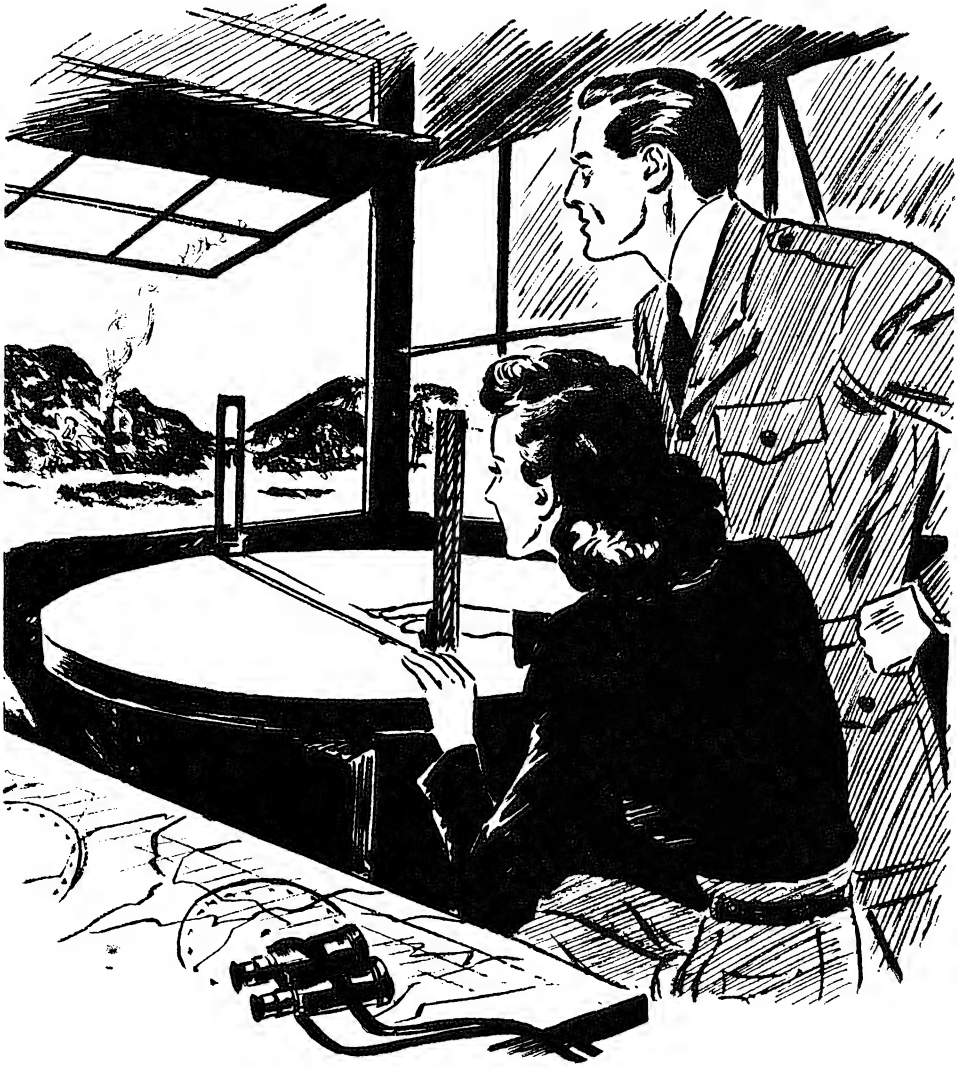
"Here's Gwen!" His face lighted up. "She's been to meet her sister and the kids. I guess she's stopping to let you know, so if you run into them on the road you'll know they have permits. Gwen's thoughtful that way."

Rhoda's dark eyes blazed. "She's stopping on the chance of finding you here," she burst out before she could check herself. "No doubt she asked Joel where you were. She's thoughtful all right—about Gwen!"

His bronze face darkened. "That's not very sporting of you. Gwen told me you didn't like her, but she overlooked that when she recommended you for this position."

The color ebbed out of Rhoda's face, leaving it white and drawn. She was so angry her voice shook. "I didn't know until this morning that you'd asked her about me. I need this job badly. Bob and I have worked hard to hang onto the little place dad left us and I'd hate to lose it while he's away. But if I hadn't promised Bob, if he wasn't counting on me to do this job, too, I . . . I'd walk off here today and go to work in a defense plant!"

"That would be very foolish," Garth said sharply. "Although I knew Bob well, remember I'd only



Rhoda whirled around, her breath catching in a gasp of dismay as she saw the column of smoke to which he had referred. Biting her lip, she spun the firefinder until the horsehair was squarely on the smoke. Quickly, she jotted down her findings.

met you a few times. I hesitated to hire you solely on your brother's say-so, but when the supervisor's daughter also recommended you, I decided to take a chance on you."

Gwen's car braked to a stop at the foot of the tower. A door slammed and children's voices rose in eager chatter as the party started up the stairs.

"I'm not grateful," Rhoda told him bluntly. "I could have given you plenty of references if you'd asked for them." She stopped as Gwen reached the top of the stairs.

"Darling, what luck finding you here!" Gwen exclaimed. "The kids wanted to see a lookout tower and I knew you wouldn't mind, Rhoda —" She paused with a startled flutter of her long lashes. "Oh, dear, we're not interrupting an inspection, are we? Forgive me, Garth. I should have known that was why you'd be here."

"I'm through." Garth picked up his hat. "Rhoda had everything in first-class shape."

"Didn't I tell you she'd be perfect for this job?" Gwen's smile made Rhoda grip the back of a chair with whitened knuckles. "Come on down and meet Julie," Gwen went on. "She's anxious to see you. She's the only member of the family you haven't met."

"You go down and prepare her," Garth told her. "I'll give Rhoda a message for Joel and come right along."

"You're going to marry Gwen, aren't you?" Rhoda said tersely as the other girl disappeared down the stairs.

He looked amused. "I'll be afraid to say positively until I've asked her."

"Well, anyway, I owe you an apology," she went on. "I don't like Gwen and I hate to think she had anything to do with getting me this job. But I shouldn't have taken my resentment out on you. I'm sorry I was so ornery!"

"I wish you'd forget anyone recommended you to me. You're holding this position on your own account. I want you to stay, Rhoda —for me."

She tried to say something, but the words stuck in her throat. At last she managed a shaky, "I'll do my best to please you."

He grinned. "That won't be difficult."

An automobile horn tooted impatiently. She caught the sudden contraction of a muscle in the ranger's jaw before he said briskly, "Give Joel a ring, will you, and tell him I'll be at the station in a couple of hours." He paused in the doorway. "You don't have to do all the tough jobs to prove you can handle this job, Rhoda. Take it easy. I don't want anything to happen to my No. 1 lookout." He went on down the steps and in a few moments she saw him ride away alongside Gwen's slowly moving car. Her eyes misted. She might be his No. 1 lookout, but Gwen was still his No. 1 sweetheart. She turned abruptly, picked up the phone and called Joel.

II.

The following afternoon two chrome miners stopped at the tower.

"We want to know why our families can't go picnicking in the woods and swimming and fishing in the river," one of them demanded. "Or do you have to work for the forest service to get to do those things?"

"The forest service has nothing to do with it," Rhoda said positively. "The army closed the forests along the coast to all recreation because if a fire got started, the ocean would be covered by a smoke blanket fifty miles out and the roads would be blocked with fire-fighters and equipment. And wouldn't that be a swell time for some enemy planes to come in!"

"We know all that," the man replied, "and we've been willing to do everything the ranger asked of us. But if it's all right for the supervisor's daughter to fish, swim and ride where she pleases, looks like it ought to be all right for us to do the same."

A chill ran the length of Rhoda's spine. "You . . . you mean Gwen has been doing this?" she asked. Before the man spoke she knew what his reply was going to be and she dreaded it. She'd heard rumors, yes, but nothing definite up to now.

"We've seen her swimming and riding everywhere, and I'll bet there's not a fishing spot on the river she hasn't tried," he said sullenly.

"Well, all I can do is report this to the district ranger," Rhoda told him. "I . . . I'm sure if he finds she is breaking the terms of her permit, he'll revoke it."

"Revoking her permit won't do any good," the man said as they turned to leave. "She thinks she owns the forest." He paused at the top of the stairs. "You can tell Garth he better not count on us for any fire-fighting. We're willing to co-operate all right, but we figure it ought to work both ways."

Rhoda turned back into the room and glared at the telephone. Why must all the unpleasant tasks fall to her? She wished that just once she could talk to the ranger about something gay and pleasant. Not that it mattered, really. She couldn't ever expect to be anything more than his No. 1 lookout. She took a deep breath. Being his No. 1 lookout meant she should do her duty. She picked up the phone and called Deer Lick. Garth Madden answered.

"This . . . this is Rhoda," she stammered. "I have to tell you something you won't want to hear about Gwen."

"Yes?" His voice was harsh. "What's wrong between you and Gwen now?"

"It's not between us," she said quickly. "A couple of miners just left here. They say Gwen's been swimming, riding and fishing all over the forest. They're pretty sore because she can do these things and their families can't. They said to tell you not to count on any of them for fire-fighting."

"That's absurd! Gwen knows how important it is to keep the good will of these people. I hope you explained that there's a great deal of private land around the Gilbert ranch and that Gwen could do as she pleased on that without violating the terms of her permit."

"No, I didn't," she answered flatly. "I told them I'd report the matter to you."

"You'll have to learn to be more convincing with these people," he said sharply. "You mustn't let your personal feelings influence you in matters connected with your work. You know as well as I do that Gwen would never violate the closure order. Why should she? What reason would she have?"

"The same reason she's always had!" Rhoda was furious. Her words tumbled out in an angry flood. "She's never paid any attention to rules and regulations. She thinks they don't apply to her. I've seen her smoking on a brush-bordered trail where a single spark could have started a hundred-acre fire. She's broken every regulation in the book and gotten away with it because her dad's such a square-shooter nobody'd ever report her. He was ranger on this district for four years when he first started out and the old-timers swear by him."

"Gwen may be a bit headstrong," he admitted, "but she'd never do anything to get me in wrong with these people. However, I'll speak to her about it tonight."

"You'd better speak pretty firmly if you don't want every logger and miner on this district down on you," Rhoda snapped, and hung up the receiver with a bang.

Her anger died as suddenly as it had risen. She regretted having spoken so plainly. But how could he be so sure of Gwen? "Because he loves her," her tortured heart answered. "When you love a person you trust her. You're ready to stand by her against the whole world if necessary."

He called her the following morning. "I was right about Gwen," he said in an I-told-you-so tone of voice. "She said she met those fellows one day as she was returning from the Haskin place and I can vouch for the truth of that. I happened to be at Haskin's the same day and I saw the men and talked to them. I guess they didn't know the Gilbert and Haskin ranches join, so Gwen was not on forest land at all."

"I hope the miners accept that explanation," Rhoda answered dryly, and hung up before he could say any more.

At seven o'clock that evening she drove to the spring for water. As she was filling the five-gallon can in the back of her coupé, she heard a horse coming up the trail below the road. Wondering who it could be, she rested the bucket on the bumper and waited. Presently, a sweat-streaked horse climbed out of the brush onto the road and stopped with a snort of surprise. The girl on his back glared down at her.

"Hello, Gwen," Rhoda said quietly. "There's no private land around here. You're at least two miles inside the closed area."

"So what?" Gwen's voice was contemptuous. "What are you going to do about it? Run and tell Garth, I suppose." She hesitated, stared at Rhoda an instant, then she laughed mockingly.

"Maybe it'll surprise you to learn that Garth is right behind me. He stopped at Boulder Creek to talk to a miner. I'm going on ahead so I can tell cook there'll be one extra for dinner. What have you got to say to that?"

"I think you're lying," Rhoda said.

"Well, if you want to make yourself ridiculous and get Garth really sore at you, just wait here until he comes along and tell him your cute little story. If I wasn't in a hurry, I'd love to wait and hear what he says when he finds out you're spying on him." She heeled her horse forward, her taunting laugh drifting back to Rhoda as horse and rider disappeared down the road.

Rhoda watched her out of sight, then she walked over to the edge of the road and gazed down into the canyon. But the purple shadows veiled the canyon floor and only the sound of the creek came dimly up to her. She'd known Gwen was lying all the time.

She went back to her car and finished filling the water can. What should she do about Gwen? She'd caught her this time in open violation of the closure. But would Garth believe her if she reported it to him? It would be her word against Gwen's. She tossed the bucket into the car and climbed in behind the wheel. Whether he believed it or not, it was up to her to tell him about it. And that was just what she was going to do!

She started the motor and backed the coupé around. As she started forward in low gear, Garth Madden's bay horse stepped into the road ahead of her. So Gwen was telling the truth!

He swung out of the saddle and faced her excitedly. "How long have you been here?" he cried. "Did you just come?"

She eyed him coldly and made a swift decision. "I've been here long enough to decide that I'm quitting my job as soon as you can find someone to take my place," she said stiffly.

He frowned. "We'll go into that later. Right now I want to know if anyone has ridden up this trail since you've been here."

Her fingers tightened on the rim of the steering wheel. What was he trying to do? He knew she was supposed to record every happening and, most important of all, every infraction of rules in her daily diary. Was he, then, wanting her to say she'd seen Gwen? But he needn't worry because she had no intention of recording the meeting. She'd never give him that satisfaction. Let him wonder about it and worry.

She pushed against the seat back, wishing he weren't so close, wishing his gaze wouldn't meet hers so directly. "If anyone came by while I was filling my bucket at the spring, I didn't see him," she told him. "The trail isn't visible from there."

"Probably passed before you got here," he said offhandedly. "I thought I followed fresh horse tracks up the trail, but I may have been wrong."

"How soon do you suppose you can get someone to replace me on Hardscrabble?"

"I don't want to replace you," he told her quickly. "I thought I'd made that plain. I don't want anyone but you on Hardscrabble."

"I'm sorry, but my mind is made up." She closed her heart against the appeal of his voice.

His figure stiffened. "Can you suggest anyone who might fill Bob's place satisfactorily?"

"If you're hinting that quitting my job is being disloyal to Bob, you can be sure he's going to know all about it." She let the coupé roll forward. "When Bob learns the real reason I'm quitting, it won't matter to him who has Hardscrabble, because he won't want it again, ever!" She flipped the lights on and pressed the accelerator hard.

"I hate him!" she cried. "I never want to see him again!" But tears cascaded down her cheeks as she drove swiftly along the darkening road.

Two hours later, as she was concluding a lengthy letter to Bob, a voice hailed her from the foot of the tower and Garth Madden came hurrying up the stairs.

"I've got to talk to you, Rhoda. I've just come from Gwen's." His voice sounded urgent.

"Yes, I know." She got up and stood by the firefinder. "You were there for dinner."

He shook his head. "You shouldn't have tried to cover up for her tonight. Gwen has to learn she can't break rules any more than other people can."

"But she . . . she said—"

"That she was with me. I know—I made her tell me exactly what she said. The truth is, Gwen was returning from a ride when she happened to catch sight of my horse standing in front of Brad Colter's cabin on Boulder Flat. To keep from being seen, she rode through the brush until she got around the

"THAT'S FOR ME FOR ENERGY"
BETTER TASTE...
PEPSI-COLA
...BIGGER DRINK

flat. She was certain she had not been seen, then when she bumped into you, she knew she was caught. She had to think fast and she did. She told you the only story that would shut you up."

Rhoda stared at him, unaware that she had been holding her breath. "Then you . . . you were not—"

"I was not with Gwen," he said. "I hadn't even seen her. In fact, I wasn't even thinking of her. If you hadn't acted so strange when I asked if you'd seen anyone pass the spring I probably wouldn't have thought any more about those horse tracks, either. But your behavior puzzled me, so I started trailing that horse after you left and I followed him right down the Gilbert trail to the Gilbert corral." He grinned sheepishly.

"I was wrong about those miners, too. Gwen had been to the Haskin place and I had seen her, but instead of going home when she left there, she went for a ride on Tincup Mountain and stopped for a swim in the river. On the way home she met the two miners. She admitted she'd been fishing several times, too." He sighed.

"I was so darn sure Gwen wouldn't do anything to get me in wrong with these folks. Well, she and her sister are pulling out tomorrow. That was the bribe I demanded for agreeing not to mention this to her father." His hand shot out and grasped Rhoda's.

"Now you understand why I had to see you tonight. I can't bear to let you go, just as I've discovered how much you mean to me. I've been like a blind puppy, but I'm getting my eyes open fast. Won't you stay, Rhoda, and give me a chance to redeem myself?"

She looked at him with her heart in her eyes, but she was afraid to believe what she hoped he meant. "I'll stay," she told him. "I'll be your No. 1 lookout just as long as you want me."

His arm encircled her shoulders. "What about my No. 1 sweetheart?" he asked. "Will you be that, too?"

"I'll take any job you pick out for me," she murmured, and helped him sign the contract with a kiss.

THE END.

* * * * * * * * * * *

FIRST THINGS

Across the fields—so near they seem,
  Though fifty miles away—
The mountains shoulder up the sky.
  I'll climb them some bright day.

But first I have a thousand things
  Which I must really do;
Sweep the hearth and mend your coat
  And bake a pie for you.

The mountains will wait patiently;
  They're sturdy, like our love.
But little things a husband needs
  I must be thinking of.

Harriet A. Bradfield.

SO HE CHOSE David

by Crandall Clement

The Story So Far:

Denver, notorious as a gun fighter, arrives in Los Griegos, summoned by Cal Jewett, rancher, to catch up with rustlers. In a restaurant, Denver finds that the owner is his long-lost wife, Kate, who had left him when he had taken to gunplay in an attempt to find the murderer of his brother. He sees, too, Kathy, his daughter, who is a waitress in her mother's restaurant. When Dick Jewett, Cal's son, makes a play for Kathy in Denver's presence, he hurls him out of the restaurant bodily. The Morgan clan, wanting to oust

A Four-part Story
Part II

"When my gun comes out of leather, someone is sure to get killed," drawled Denver, and he was not a man to make idle boasts.

Denver from town, try to stir Dick to anger so that Denver will kill the boy in self-defense and be ordered out of the town, or murdered by the boy's father, Cal, who had hired him. This plan is foiled, however, by Denver's quick thinking, and Denver stays on in town, gaining the respect and admiration of Dick.

IV.

Denver was just finishing his dinner when Dick Jewett appeared. Kate had set the kitchen table in the rear of the restaurant, and Kathy took care of the trade as Kate served Denver and filled orders.

Dick walked slowly to Denver after a flushed glance at Kate.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said to her briefly. He turned to Denver. "Thanks for helpin' me get sobered up last night. I don't 'member much, but it must of been bad." He rolled the rim of his hat in his hands and grinned sheepishly. "I must of been mighty drunk."

"You were, Dick," Kate commented dryly.

Dick spoke to Denver, "Dad forgot about leavin' a horse for you last night in the fuss of getting me home, so he sent me in to fetch you out to the place this afternoon. I thought mebbe I'd get here 'fore you et, and you could come out for dinner, but I reckon you're getting better grub 'n we'd have. Brinker, our cook, ain't so good." He turned to Kate. "Look," he said, "Kathy's awful mad."

"Yes, she is," Kate agreed.

"You tell her not to be sore, will you?"

"Fight your own battles, Dick," Kate told him.

Kathy came into the kitchen, glanced at Dick briefly, and went to her mother. "Berry pie, three of them."

Kate took a pie from the shelf and knifed out three pieces.

"Kathy, listen," Dick said, following her across the room. "I'm sorry about last night. Honest, I am. I must of made a plumb fool out of myself."

"You did," Kathy answered over her shoulder, coldly.

Kathy picked up the three pieces of pie and went through the door. Dick looked at Kate disconsolately. "You reckon she'll forgive me?" he asked. It was apparent that he was used to being forgiven.

"You'll have to ask her about that."

Kathy came back into the kitchen as Denver was finishing the last of his coffee. Dick caught Kathy's arm.

"Listen," he said, "you c'n do as you please, I reckon, but tell me right off, are you goin' to forgive me or not? I ain't goin' to go on beggin' forever."

Kathy broke away from him. "Never!" she cried angrily.

"That's that," Dick muttered. He turned to Denver. "Reckon we better move 'long if you're through."

Denver motioned for Dick to go ahead. He placed a coin on the table and touched Kathy's shoulder as she stood at the stove, her back to Dick, her head down.

"Thanks," he said to Kate, "for the dinner. Swell." He went out through the kitchen door after Dick, glancing once at Kate, his gray eyes resting on her impersonally, leaving her puzzled and a little uncomfortable.

Kate heard the grinding of the iron tires in the grit of the street, heard Dick's "gidyap," and then the receding sounds of the rattling buckboard.

The trail led northeast, gradually rising toward Taylor Peak and then to slope down into the distance and up into the green pastures of the lower mountain reaches. Only the tugging of the sorrel span on the buckboard and the practiced eye of a Westerner proved that the perspective was a liar, and it was all upgrade. Dick pointed with his gloved hand toward Taylor Peak.

"You see that red speck over yonder? That's the roof of the barn of the Tippy T," he commented.

Denver glanced in the direction Dick pointed. He could see the dab of red that seemed to be pasted against the valley grass that grew on the lower mountain slopes. Above was the dark of the pines patched with yellow, where the aspen groves were turning color with the early fall of high altitudes. Far above was the bare baldness of the top of the peak half hidden in the wisps of clouds and in the blue haze of the somnolent afternoon.

"Our beef ranges from Taylor Peak clean north to Constanza and the north ridge," Dick went on, pointing farther toward his left where, beyond Taylor, another peak rose above the valley, and still beyond that, blued in the distance, a long ridge that stretched east and west across the northern end of the valley.

"You don't like Hughes?" Denver asked suddenly.

Dick swore, "Hell, no! It ain't only he took Kathy to the dance last night. It ain't that. It's on account there's talk he's been playin' around with Johnny Dake's daughter."

"What's wrong with that?" Denver asked coldly. "Ain't she all right?"

Dick looked at Denver in surprise. "Sure, she's all right. It ain't that. It's that he's been doin' it on the sly, sort of." Dick shrugged his shoulders. "Reckon I shouldn't said anythin'. I ain't said nothin' to Kathy. A feller can't."

Dick seemed to be thinking. He was silent for several minutes. Some of the ineffectual childishness that he had displayed in Los Griegos seemed to disappear as he handled the span of sorrels with definite mastery. His mind seemed to have been on the events of the last evening for when he spoke, he spoke gruffly to hide embarrassment.

"Reckon you must figure I'm an awful jackass."

Dick didn't seem to know how to go on. Denver said nothing. Dick changed the subject abruptly.

"Didn't Silver of the M T Bar say somethin' to you last night when you was takin' me to Kate's?" he asked.

"Yeah," Denver answered laconically.

"What you goin' to do?"

"Nothin'."

"He'll be comin' in, won't he?"

"Yeah." Denver spat over the wheel of the buckboard and nursed his tobacco into the corner of his mouth. "He'll be in." He glanced at Dick. "You ever seen a feller die?"

Dick turned, surprised. "No," he admitted.

Denver nursed his tobacco a moment. "Reckon you'll be more careful of that gun when you seen somebody get killed." He paused. "Likely, Silver is goin' to die."

Denver subsided into silence that held until they came up over a rise and looked up at the Tippy T outfit clustered under a grove of firs.

Cal Jewett was standing in the shade of the porch over the ranchhouse door. A puncher stepped around the corner of the house and waited for Denver and Dick to get out of the buckboard.

"Slim," Dick said, "this here is Denver. Slim's our foreman," he explained.

"Howdy," Slim greeted and put

out his hand, his frank, honest face wreathed in a smile.

Denver answered him briefly: "Howdy."

"Come on inside, Denver," called Jewett from the portico.

"I'll take the team around," Slim offered.

"Come on into the house when you get the team unhitched," Jewett called to Slim. "Afternoon," he greeted Denver. "Come on in and set. I'll get us somethin' to drink. Had dinner?"

Denver nodded and sat down on a sofa. The horsehide cover was slippery under his shoulders as he leaned back. Dick pulled off his gloves and hung his hat on a hook back of the door.

The room lacked the touch that a woman's hand would give it. The furniture was made from hewn pine, and the floor of the pine slabs.

Slim came into the house just as Jewett brought in four glasses and a pitcher of cold cider.

"Sort of dusty comin' out in the buckboard, wasn't it?" he asked Denver. He held a glass out to Denver, who nodded as he took it.

"Spring water's purty cold," Dick offered. "Got a nice spring up back of the ranch and dad piped it down."

Jewett sat down heavily across from Denver. "Reckon you begun to figure what I asked you to come to Madera for, ain't you?"

Denver looked steadily and disinterestedly across the room at Jewett. and waited for the rancher to go on.

"I been in this valley for forty-fifty year," Jewett said morosely. "I been here since the Chisholm Trail opened up—we got our stuff out through the Conte Pass in them days, eastward. I still got rights filed on that pass land. But now we drive out of the south end of the valley, over the south slope down to Santa Fe for shipment. Hell of a long drive, too." He paused and agitated his drink with a circular movement of his hand, then rested the glass on the arm of the chair.

"Since then," Jewett went on, "things 've gone plumb to hell. We used to hang a rustler pronto, but now we're supposed to have law 'n' order here, and we ain't. Hard times, homesteaders, then somebody rustles all my best stock and I ain't able to do a thing." He paused. "And Morgan's the only feller who can do it."

"He's got some kind of an outlet through the Sangre de Cristos, some place over there in that canyon between Crazy Man's Peak and Otto Mountain," Dick cut in. "Only we can't find out where it is."

As Dick spoke, a skinny, bald cook came in from the kitchen and picked up the pitcher which was nearly empty. "You want more?" he asked Jewett. His slanty eyes and yellow face made him look almost Oriental.

"No. That's enough," Jewett told him shortly.

Denver glanced up at the cook and his eyes had that opaque blankness they always held when his thoughts were hidden. He waited, not speaking until the man had gone. Then, his head held on the side, he seemed to be listening as the footfalls sounded on the planks in the room beyond.

"Had him long?" he asked finally.

"No. Six months, I guess. Ain't worth much, either."

"Know anything about him?"

"Not much, except he's a hell of a bad range man. He ain't a cattleman, that's sure. But we gotta eat."

"What do you want me to do?" Denver asked abruptly.

Jewett's eyes narrowed. "Clean out them damned rustlers. You got a reputation for bein' hell on rustlers. Clean 'em out."

Denver was still a moment, and his expression was gloomy.

"I'm no hired gunman," he said slowly.

"What the hell are you, then?" Jewett asked explosively.

Denver said nothing for a long moment and tension built up in the room. Jewett's face became red.

"I don't like rustlers," Denver said finally. "When my gun comes out o' leather, somebody gets killed."

Jewett sighed and relaxed. "Sorry," he answered. "You do it your way. I ain't layin' down the law for you."

Denver walked to the door. "I'm riding back to town," he said, turning. "I'll see you when I need you. He turned to Dick. "Got a horse for me?"

"Sure," Dick answered. He took his hat from the hook on the door. "Come along and take your pick."

There were several good-looking horses in the corral and Denver selected a blue roan, a tall horse with a heavy jaw and a determined eye.

"You sure pick 'em," Slim offered. "That there nag is plenty salty and sure can run."

Denver dropped a loop over the horse's head and drew the roan in. He threw the saddle over the roan's back with a practiced flip, and pulled the cinches tight.

"I'm ridin' in with you, Denver, if you don't mind my company," Dick said suddenly.

He went into the barn and returned as Denver was ready to mount. He saddled his own mount and joined the other.

For a while, neither spoke. Then Dick explained, "There's an ice-cream social at the church tonight. Reckon I'll go."

"Heard about it," Denver admitted. "Suppose they'd run a feller like me out of a social?" he asked meekly.

Dick grinned suddenly and glanced toward Denver. "Sure not. You mean mebbe you're goin'?"

"Went to church this mornin'," Denver told him.

"No!"

"Sure did. Got into an argument with the parson, too."

Dick grinned and then laughed. "Doggone if you ain't the funniest feller I ever seen!"

Denver reached to his belt for his gloves. He looked down when he discovered one was missing. "Must of lost it back at your outfit," he hazarded.

"I expect they'll find it, most likely," Dick assured him.

It was nearly dusk when Dick and Denver reached Los Griegos.

Seeing the famous Denver at the ice-cream social wasn't so much a shock after seeing him in church. At first the men didn't quite know what to say, and the ladies were very busy getting things ready. Rev. Johnston took charge of Denver and introduced him. Ranchmen shook hands noncommittally, but as Jorganson said to Saunders a little later, Denver didn't act like such a bad feller at all.

Then, when the ice cream was served, Kate and Denver sat under the cottonwood on the bench. The lanterns cast yellow shadows, and the children ran past their elders in their interminable games. The sound of laughter and small talk was like the chuckle of a complacent mountain stream. Denver finished the last of his ice cream with relish.

"Let's take the dishes back and walk up to the ridge, Bill. It's beautiful in the moonlight," Kate suggested.

"All right. The social goin' to break up now?"

Kate laughed. "Dear me, no! They'll stay and talk until eleven. Ranch people don't get together too often, you know."

"I'll wait," Denver murmured, and leaned against the tree, his arms folded over his chest and his heavy jaw moving slowly.

Kate rejoined him after a moment and they moved off together, walking around the church and toward the low ridge that bound the northern side of the town. They sauntered slowly, her hand resting on his arm.

"It's funny, Bill," she said softly. "It's awfully funny the way you and I talk together, just as if I hadn't run away from you eighteen years ago. Just as if we'd never separated at all."

"Yeah," Denver commented. "You still talk. I listen."

Kate laughed and leaned her cheek against his arm, her steps matching his.

"That's right—make fun of me!" she cried softly, with pretended petulance. But then she spoke soberly, "I've been thinking, Bill. I . . . I wish, terribly, I hadn't run away."

Denver touched her hand resting on his arm with his fingertips, but made no answer. They stopped in the moonlight at the top of the ridge. They could see the outlines of the jagged peaks of the Sangre de Cristos, silvered in the moonlight, and down below in the churchyard they could see the swinging lanterns and the movement of the figures beneath them. A light came on in the church.

"They're going to sing, I think," Kate murmured.

The old organ began to play softly, the notes mellowed in the night air, and then they heard the chorus of voices.

Denver's arm slipped around Kate's shoulders. She stood close to him, her head against his chest.

"It's beautiful here, Bill, in the moonlight. There's no fighting, or anything, up here."

Denver took a deep breath and lowered his head so that he could look down into Kate's eyes.

"Couldn't you smile, once?" Kate asked, her voice a plea.

She waited, watching his lips, and her own curved into a tender, provocative smile.

"Just once?"

Denver smiled. "I reckon I ain't smiled much since you left me," he said flatly.

"Would you smile if I . . . I came back to you?" Kate asked, and then gasped. "I . . . I didn't mean to say that, Bill. Only—"

She felt him stiffen beside her and his arm dropped from her shoulders. He stood unyielding beside her, his eyes fixed on the range of mountains in the distant moonlight, his expression bleak and forbidding.

"I'm sorry," Kate offered. Then she seemed to be thinking as she spoke. "No, I'm not, either." She looked up at him steadily. "I guess I mean it." She waited. "Do you want me back?" she asked in a small, frightened voice.

Denver kept his eyes on the distant ranges while she waited, and then he turned. His hands touched her shoulders.

"You reckon I'm going to change some?"

He didn't wait for her answer, but went on immediately, "I ain't likely to change. I got a job, and I'm doin' it."

"I . . . I think I'd even go your way, Bill." Her head drooped forward and she touched her forehead against his chest, hiding her face. "You'll never know how many times I've cried myself to sleep. It's been awful hard, Bill. I . . . I want to go home." She drew a long, shuddering sigh and felt his arm tighten around her shoulder again. "I want to really go home, Bill."

Denver was silent for a long time. Then he rubbed his nose.

"Reckon we better go down?"

Kate straightened and stepped

away so that she might face him. "Can we, Bill? Go home, I mean?"

"Reckon so, if you want to. Pretty soon," he answered slowly. "It's still like you left it. I ain't changed nothin' on account I ain't been there. It's all there, 'less the pack rats 've packed everything away."

Kate laughed and they walked slowly down the ridge toward the church. They saw three horsemen ride down the main street of Los Griegos to the saloon where a single window threw out a long streamer of light that sliced the darkness. One of the horses was white and Kate felt Denver's grip on her shoulder tighten. She looked up, but his face showed nothing.

The sound of singing came to them louder as they approached. As they drew near, the singing ceased and the ranchmen began to gather up their things to go home.

Kate and Denver walked slowly into the churchyard and crossed to the group about the pastor. Rev. Johnston caught sight of them.

"Glad you came, Denver. And Kate, of course. Come again."

"Powerful glad to be here, parson," Denver drawled in an even tone that was lacking in any warmth.

The pastor looked up. "Have you had a pleasant time?"

"Yeah."

There were the farewells of the ranchers and the calling back and forth between neighbors as the buckboards began to wheel away from the hitching rack.

Denver and Kate started across the yard. There was the sound of trotting horses and a sudden, harsh call across the night sounds:

"Hey, you, in there! This Denver feller here somewheres?"

Denver stood still, his face steady under the light of the lamps. Someone nearer the road answered the hail.

"Yeah, he's here some place."

"You tell him time's up and then some. Tell him to come on out here or I'm comin' in after in."

Kate gasped, "That's Silver!" She grasped Denver's arm. "You haven't got a gun. He'll kill you!"

Denver kept on walking steadily toward the road, and Kate tugged at his arm. "Stop, Bill! You've got to listen. He'll kill you!" Her voice was urgent and tense. "Stop!"

Denver stopped, but only to definitely disengage her hands from his arm. He held her away from him and turned back to the road, leaving her standing, the back of her hand pressed against her teeth, her eyes wide.

Dick stepped out toward Denver and touched his arm. He started to say something, but Denver placed one hand against his chest and pushed him back heavily. Then he walked on out into the roadway.

He could see the men there in the edge of the darkness, silhouetted in the monlight. One of the men was mounted on a white horse that moved restlessly. The slight figure was stiff and erect in the saddle.

"I told you to get out o' this here valley," Silver spoke softly. "You had plenty o' time. You been hired by that Jewett and we don't aim to have no hired gun-slingers ridin' after us."

Denver approached him until he stood only a few feet away from the head of the white horse. The ranchmen in the yard and in their buckboards quietly moved back out of the way. One rancher swore angrily at Jewett. "He's goin' to get us into a range war yet!" he muttered loud enough to be heard.

"You had your chance to go. Now you go out feet first." Silver paused. "Reach for your gun or I'll blast you where you stand."

Denver stood firm and straight in the moonlight. His tall figure, the long shadow making him seem still taller, was as still as though chiseled out of granite. Death seemed to settle over the tableau. Denver said nothing. Silver spoke again:

"I ain't used to shootin' a man down when he ain't got nerve enough to fill his hands. Go ahead and reach for your gun if you want to try it. I'll give you an even break."

The silence strained in the moonlight before the little white church building. The seconds ticked on with only the shuffling of the feet of the white horse making a sound in the night.

Rev. Johnston called from the churchyard, "In the name of God—"

"Shut up, parson," a ranchman interrupted shortly. The parson hesitated at the wheel of a buckboard, his nearsighted eyes taking in the tableau, and something of the threat that hung in the air made him pause.

"Go ahead and get it over with," one of Silver's companions muttered in a low voice.

"You goin' to draw, mister?" Silver asked.

The silence stretched again with death hanging in the air. It stretched until a woman in the churchyard screamed. A man in the buckboard near where the pastor stood began to swear steadily under his breath. A saddle creaked as one of Silver's companions moved. Still Denver stood before Silver, his hands hanging at his sides, his head forward a trifle.

"You goin' to draw, or are you goin' to leave the valley like I told you?" There was a shaky note of indecision in Silver's voice.

Denver was in the moonlight, his hands outlined in the brightness, but Silver's face and hands were in the shadow.

Silver spurred his white horse around so that his right hand was shielded from Denver. "Are you goin' to?" he asked, his voice cracking like that of a boy of fifteen. He swore at his horse and he dropped his hand to his gun. Denver did not move or speak.

"I know you got a gun. Reach for it!" Silver yelled.

Denver leaned forward a little. Silver lifted his gun and spurred the white horse forward. He threw the gun down, fanning it. A blast of fire and then another came from the gun's muzzle, blinding the people who stood in the churchyard.

Before the ranchers could focus their eyes there was a third burst of flame. No one moved, then, except Silver. He hauled spasmodically on the reins and the white horse reared. Silver toppled slowly out of the saddle, falling backward, landing on the back of his neck. There was a sickening scrunch, and the man's body lay sprawled in the dirt of the road.

Denver's gun covered the other two men who had been with Silver.

"He missed," he said briefly. He gestured with the gun at Silver. "Maybe he ain't dead. You fellows take care of him."

The two men dismounted and approached Silver.

"One of you gents take him to the doc?" Denver asked the ranchers generally.

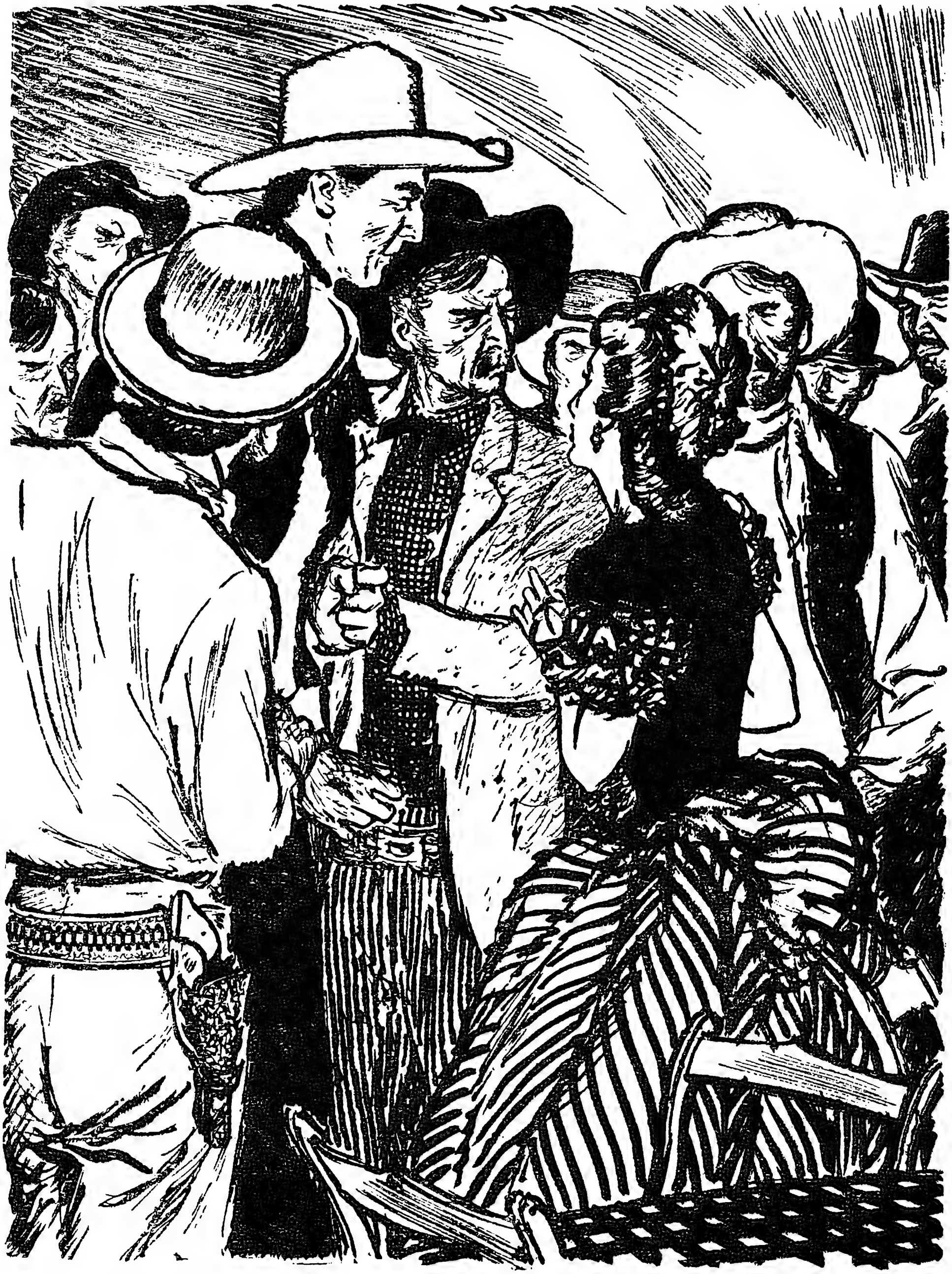
"Sure. I will," answered a rancher. He pulled his team around and stopped it by Silver's side, the horses throwing their heads and prancing with excitement. Silver's companions loaded the man into the buckboard and one of them climbed in.

"I'll go along," he said to the other. "You bring the horses."

The last man mounted and led the other horse after the buckboard and its burden down the street.

Denver stood in the street, aware that Dick leaned against the hitching rack, his gun held in readiness. The pastor approached Denver.

"I'm sorry, Denver," he said



Kate stood wide-eyed, her face pale. "You can't hang him! He didn't do it! You've got to give him a chance!" she told the marshal.

slowly. "I've been hoping that I could count on you. I felt I could count on you to prevent bloodshed in this valley."

"Hell's bells, parson," a rancher exclaimed. "If he hadn't drawed he'd be deader 'n a beef carcass. You can't blame a man—"

Denver cut in, "It's a tough country, parson."

He turned and walked slowly back to Kate who still stood where he had left her. Without a word, Kate joined him and they walked out of the churchyard toward the house where Kate and Kathy lived.

"It's no use, Denver," Kate said heavily, her voice strained. She spoke as thought it were as much to herself as to Denver. "I . . . I can't stand it."

Denver made no answer.

"You could have gone without seeing him, if you'd wanted to," Kate went on.

Denver made no answer. He stared down into Kate's eyes, his heavy features grim and cold.

"Can't you give it up—for me?"

"Adios," Denver told her abruptly, and turned away from her. He walked slowly down the road.

Dick fell in beside him. Denver glanced up. "Thanks for covering," he said.

Dick cleared his voice. "You're right," he muttered huskily. "It ain't nice—seein' a man die, I mean."

Denver walked heavily, his head down, his heavy jaw moving rhythmically.

V.

Kate still stood where Denver had left her, the moonlight silvering her hair, her eyes dark in the shadows, when Kathy and Hughes came down the street.

"You all right, mother?" Kathy asked.

"Yes, Kathy, I'm all right," Kate answered in a low voice. She sighed and turned toward the house. "We'd better go in, Kathy."

"Kate," Nate Hughes said suddenly, "I asked Kathy to marry me." His tone was a question and a plea for approval. "You approve, don't you?"

Kate looked at Hughes, and then at Kathy. Her daughter stood at her side, embarrassed and uncomfortable.

"You want to take her away from here?" Kate asked tensely.

"Yes," Hughes answered and laughed coolly. "I'm not very much of a cowboy, I guess."

"Then I'll do my best," Kate answered savagely. "Anything to get away from all this . . . this murder and killing!"

"Mother," Kathy remonstrated, frightened by the urgency of her mother's tone.

"Yes, I will!" Kate turned on her daughter wildly. "I saw a man killed tonight. I've seen others die. I . . . I can't stand it!" She began to cry stormily and hysterically. Kathy placed her arm about her mother's waist and turned toward the house.

"You'd better go now, Nate," she said. "I . . . I have to get mother inside. Good night."

"Good night," Hughes answered gently. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Hughes watched them disappear into the house, then walked swiftly through the gate out into the road. He walked through the moonlight across the vacant lot toward the large house in which he lived.

His walking was rapid and purposeful. He approached the house cautiously, paused a moment in the shadow to survey the place, and then entered the door.

The room was dark, but under the edge of the inner door a thin line of light showed. Hughes walked to the door without striking a light and tapped on it, then opened it quickly and stepped inside.

He closed the door carefully and faced around.

Brinker, Jewett's cook, sat in a chair at the desk, his almond eyes slanting more than ever in the yellow lamplight, his skin even more Chinese. He smiled at Hughes. "Howdy," he greeted.

Hughes grunted and threw his

hat down on a chair. He gestured Brinker up out of the chair in which he had been sitting and sat down himself, grunting heavily, as though his lean frame were suddenly weary.

"Denver killed Silver tonight."

Brinker's eyes widened. "Beat Silver to a draw?" he breathed, incredulity in his voice.

"No. Silver missed." Hughes swore angrily. "I told Big Slick to have Morgan keep his men off, damn them! They've likely started hell poppin'."

Brinker breathed again. "Silver dead!" He turned narrow eyes on Hughes. "We ain't much used to Western ways, boss. Mebbe you ain't going to be too lucky tryin' to tell Morgan what to do. He ain't easy to tell."

Hughes laughed shortly. "They like the easy cash that running beef means. And if it weren't for me, they'd have no market for it over Rio Grande way. They'll take orders."

Brinker shrugged his narrow shoulders and slid down into his chair. "Mebbeso, boss," he agreed carelessly. "Fetched in something you might like to hear."

"What?" Hughes asked sharply.

"Old man Jewett's borrowed enough from Harris to pay off that note, and the money is on deposit at the bank. Aims to pay it off tomorrow."

Hughes' eyes narrowed. "Pay it off tomorrow, huh?" he said softly. "That wouldn't be so good." He tapped a pencil on the desk edge, listening to the different pitched tones it gave. He swiveled around to Brinker slowly.

"I'm damned glad I brought you here, Brinker," he told him slowly. "I guess I can use you. You've got educated fingers."

Brinker smiled. "I figured on something like that, boss." He reached into his pocket and took out a yellow glove. "Lookit here. Glove. Seen it before?"

Hughes eyed the glove. "No. Why?"

Brinker put the glove back into his pocket. "It belongs to this here Denver. He done lost it out at the Tippy T." He grinned and Hughes slapped his leg.

"That's all right, Brinker, you've done all right. Yes, sir, all right—"

Dick glanced up at Denver as they walked down the dark street after they had left Kate. Dick started to speak, hesitated, and then asked:

"You comin' out to the ranch tonight?"

Denver's preoccupation in his own thoughts was heavy. He failed to hear Dick's question. After a pause, Dick repeated his query.

"You comin' out to the Tippy T tonight?"

Denver shook his head. "No," he answered briefly.

"I'll leave the roan at the livery for you," Dick offered.

Denver nodded absently.

Dick walked on down toward the livery as Denver turned in at the hotel, his footsteps echoing flatly against the buildings on the other side of the street.

The clerk lay back in his chair, his feet propped up against his desk, his head back, his mouth wide open, snoring. A gold tooth shone in the lamp's yellow light. Denver reached over him for his key, took it from the rack without waking him. He started for the stairway before he noticed there was someone else in the lobby. He stood tense, his hand near the place where his shirt was unbuttoned.

From the darkness of the far side of the lobby, a dark figure emerged into the light, walking steadily.

"It's me, Denver. Johnny Dake."

Denver stood waiting, his right

hand still high at his waist.

"Don't blame you for wonderin', Denver," Dake said. "But I ain't with Morgan and his outfit. And," he added softly but earnestly, "I reckon whatever you know about me, you know I shoot square."

Denver still waited.

"I got to talk to you, Denver."

Denver's gray-eyed gaze studied the gambler's thin features, and seemed satisfied. He nodded toward the staircase and, as the gambler climbed the steps, he followed. Dake turned down toward Denver's room, felt Denver's heavy hand resting on his shoulder as they stopped. Denver pressed the key into his hand and motioned toward the door.

Dake smiled at Denver's caution. He unlocked the door and pushed it open. He felt hard steel pressing against his spine and he walked into the darkness of the room, stood for a moment in the darkness before he heard Denver follow him, closing the door softly.

Denver lit a match and held it high. He looked about the hotel room with quick eyes and motioned Dake toward the lamp in the bracket across the room. Dake took out a match and lit the kerosene lamp just as Denver's match went out. He turned the lamp up and then turned to face Denver.

"I ain't carryin' a gun," he said.

Denver's practiced eye searched the gambler's figure for traces of a concealed gun, and then he reached out to feel Dake's sleeves. He slipped his own gun into his holster under his shoulder and sat down on the bed.

"Talk," Denver ordered coldly.

Dake sat in the armless rocker over by the window and crossed his legs. He took out a pipe and filled it with tobacco.

"It's been an awful long time since we crossed each other back in Montana, Denver."

Denver nodded grimly. "You send Silver and Beak up to the opera house?" he asked.

"No," Dake answered. "I know you'd wonder if I hadn't. Big Slick Thompson sent them up."

Denver's eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, Big Slick Thompson, owner and proprietor of the Los Griegos saloon," Dake went on bitterly. "The boss!" He faced Denver. "I know me and Morgan was thick in them days, but I had nothin' to do with him here in Madera. I just kept my mouth shut."

Denver's heavy silence seemed to slow Dake's tongue, to, for he found nothing else to say at once.

"I wish . . . I wish a lot of things, I suppose," Dake went on finally. "But the game got me. Seems like I couldn't let go. Always figured on gettin' a stake and quittin'. Only never got a stake, just a living. Never figured much about what I was doin' to the wife and Virginia." He laughed shortly, but without humor. "It ain't a nice picture, me draggin' a girl around while I work tables! Hell of it is that she's my own daughter."

"There ain't no way to change things as has already been done," Denver observed flatly. "We can't change anything."

"No, you can't," Dake agreed. "That's the burnin' hell of it. Only I can do something about what I aim to do next." His voice had a sharp note of decision in it.

Denver looked up. Dake walked to the window and looked out, his hands in his pockets. He turned back.

"Yeah, I'm goin' to square things up a little. I don't aim to have any skunks in my family. I come here tonight to tell you."

Denver's gray eyes asked his question.

"Nothin', Denver, that ain't strictly my business. Only"—he paused—

"only, there's something I'd like to have you do for me. Will you see that nothin' happens to my wife and girl? They got money—it ain't that I'm worryin' about. I just figure I'd feel better if you'd say that you'd see nothin' happened to them in case I wasn't around."

He took a deep breath and waited. Denver didn't answer for a long time. He studied the floor as he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. His jaw moved slowly as he switched his tobacco from one cheek to the other. "Yeah," he said finally.

"Thanks," Dake breathed. He thrust out his hand to Denver. "You're a square man. There ain't another soul in this whole eternal valley that I know I could trust. Even if one time I was on the other side from you."

Denver glanced up and took Dake's hand. He seemed to have something to say, and Dake waited for him to speak.

"I been ridin' a long time since I seen you," Denver muttered.

"Yeah," Dak answered. "Eighteen years, since 'fore Virginia was born."

"Yeah, eighteen years." Denver leaned forward, his elbows on his knees again. "There's a fellow somewhere I been huntin' for." He paused. "Know who it is?" he asked abruptly, raising his head to stare at Dake.

"No," Dake answered, starting at the grimness in Denver's look.

Denver was slow to finish the thought he had brought out into the open. When he did speak it was very low, and only the intensity of his tone, the rubbing of his hands together and the working of muscles along the ridge of his jaw betrayed that he was speaking under the drive of a powerful emotion.

"My brother, he was my partner in them days. Our outfit wasn't big and you fellows paid practically no 'tention to us. But that kid brother of mine growed up beside me. I took care of him when our pa and ma died by Indians when we was little. I took care of my brother—Jerry, his name was—and seen him grow up."

"I remember him," Dake breathed. "Sure, I remember him."

Denver went on, "And he was a good rider. He was goin' to marry a girl at the Bar T. Genevieve Brandt, her name was. We was partners, like I said." He paused for several seconds. "I wouldn't've minded so much, him bein' killed, I mean, if he hadn't been plugged in the back without no show of a chance. Shot with a .45 in the back not more than five feet away."

Dake started to say something. "I never knew—"

"Dake," Denver broke in grimly, "I been followin' and huntin' for that fellow who killed my brother for eighteen years now. And for the first time, I figure maybe I'm getting close."

Dake started and paled. "You don't think—"

"Hell, no," Denver grunted. "It ain't you."

"Eighteen years!" Dake said softly to himself. He looked at Denver. "Thanks, Denver." His eyes began to narrow. "I'm just beginnin' to figure it!" He paused as his thoughts reflected themselves in his eyes.

"This here Kate and Kathy? They're yours?"

Denver nodded.

Dake shook his head wonderingly. "Reckon I'll be goin'." He turned back at the door. "I never figured it before! Honest!" He opened the door. "Adios, Denver," he said softly, and shut the door behind him.

Denver pulled off his boots and placed his .45 under his pillow. Then he blew out the light and lay down, the springs squeaking their protest.

It was just dawn when Denver rose and went downstairs to the lobby. The clerk was not yet at his deck. He walked out through the door of the hotel. The restaurant was closed, too. He went on down the street toward the livery barn. At his sides, laced to his thighs with leather thongs, were his two guns, one on his left hip holstered high, and the other low on the right thigh.

Mick, the livery attendant, was asleep on a cot in the back of the barn, and Denver stepped through the unlocked doors. A horse in the near stall nickered and stamped.

Denver shook Mick by the shoulder, waking the beary-eyed old-timer from deep sleep.

"I'm ridin'," Denver told him. "Get the blue roan out, will you?" He got some oats from the bin and fed the roan while Mick got dressed.

Mick was not fully dressed when Denver heard the first long yell.

"What the devil was that?" ejaculated Mick.

Denver walked to the door and stared down the street. There was no one in sight. He returned to the roan and saddled her up, then led it to water.

Denver mounted and was riding out into the street when he saw the stubby marshal. The marshal saw him the same instant.

"Hey, you, wait a minute!"

Denver reined the roan across the street. Down from the hotel, several riders came at a run. Denver looked at the marshal.

"Say," the marshal said belligerently. "You know anything about it?"

"What's up, marshal?" Denver asked quietly.

"The bank's been busted into."

Other riders and men on foot drew up about them. Nate Hughes touched the marshal's arm.

"What's it all about?" he asked.

"Bank's been robbed," the marshal answered. "I just stopped Denver here as he was leavin' town."

The crowd was getting larger as people came from their homes. The marshal gestured to Denver.

"Get down, mister. I got something to show you around here."

Nate Hughes took the roan as Denver dismounted and, with the crowd following, walked around the bank building. On the ground there lay a dark figure that Denver recognized at once.

"Dake. He's dead," the marshal explained, touching the body with a boot. "Cut with a knife, he was. Who done it?"

Baldy and Big Slick came around the corner and shouldered to the center of the group. They paused beside the body.

"Dake," Big Slick commented. "Good table man, he was."

"Say," a sharp voice popped up from the edge of the crowd, "that there Johnny Dake was visitin' with Denver, there, after midnight last night."

Denver looked over the heads of the crowd to where the little clerk of the hotel stood, half clothed, his cowlick badly smeared over his brow. The marshal yelled through the crowd:

"Come here, you!"

The clerk was defiant as he glanced up at Denver.

"Yeah. I seen him. And I never seen Dake come down, either."

Nate Hughes appeared at the corner of the bank and called:

"Hey, marshal, come here!"

The marshal glared at Denver and commanded the men who stood about, "Make him stay there until I come back," and ran to the corner where Nate waited.

"If this here bank goes broke, I get cleaned out," muttered Elias Holdrege.

"Yeah," agreed another rancher grimly.

The marshal returned with Hughes at his side. He kept his hand behind him as he approached Denver and stopped just before the tall prisoner. His small eyes stared up at Denver.

"You wear gloves?" he asked.

"Yeah," Denver answered. His eyebrows raised as he stiffened.

"This yours?" the marshal asked, holding out a glove.

Denver looked at it briefly, and nodded. "Yeah."

"I guess that figures it, then. This glove was found in the doorway that leads into the bank. This feller admits it's his. I reckon we got the right feller."

"Hey, marshal," someone objected, "that ain't rightly proof. You better see some more. How about searchin' his room there at the hotel, or his saddlebags for some evidence?"

"Sure enough," the marshal agreed. "Bring that roan here," he ordered. The horse was led up. The marshal reached into the saddle pockets and drew out a bundle of bank notes and then a handful of cash. He smiled and a murmur rose from the crowd of men.

"You done got yourself hanged, mister," the marshal said grimly. He turned to the two men nearest him. "Carry Dake into the restaurant—it's the closest place, I guess." He turned to Denver. "I'll take them guns." He lifted out Denver's two guns and somebody called for him to look for a shoulder holster. He patted Denver's side and answered that Denver wasn't wearing one.

"Come on," he commanded, and the cavalcade crossed the road toward Kate's restaurant.

"Marshal, somebody get Dake's wife and girl," old Stuart called.

"Yeah. That's right. You get 'em, Jorganson, will you?"

"Me? Aw, hell, I couldn't—"

"Kate'll do it," Denver put in grimly.

The marshal looked up quickly and then looked around for someone else.

"Reckon that's best," he admitted, glancing at Denver.

They entered the restaurant as Kate came from the kitchen. The men carrying Dake laid him on the floor. Kate stared across the counter, down at Dake, her eyes widening in horror. She glanced up at Denver, a question in her eyes, but he shook his head slightly.

"Kate, you got to tell Dake's wife," he said, before the marshal could speak.

Kate turned. "Yes . . . yes, of course. I'll go right away." She put on her coat and ran down to the front door, her eyes turned away from the body.

"Looks like our bank is busted," the marshal grunted.

There was a moment's silence.

"That finishes me," a rancher muttered and laughed shortly, his voice harsh in the room.

"How much in the saddlebags?" someone asked.

The marshal shook his head. "Not much." He turned to Denver. "Where's the rest of it?"

Denver said nothing.

"Johnny Dake was all right," somebody contributed.

"Hell"—Holdrege laughed suddenly—"Jewett'll get this guy off."

Denver felt the eyes of the men fixed on him.

"He ain't goin' to get off," old Stuart stated grimly.

"We goin' to string him up?" asked the little clerk, his voice tremulous and scared.

Denver's eyebrows raised a trifle as he heard the question.

"Re-reckon I better lock him up," stuttered the marshal.

"String him up! Hell with locking him up. I had my whole stake in that bank. Jewett ain't gettin' him off." Holdrege's tone was angry.

"Yeah, but make him tell what he done with the rest o' the money first," Big Slick suggested, "and then string him up."

Denver sat down in a chair at the red-checkered table and leaned forward, his chin in the palm of his hand.

"He must o' had somebody helpin' him. Make him tell who it was," Big Slick went on.

"He don't seem to care none he's killed two men tonight. One with a gun and one with a knife."

"Yeah, but Silver drew on him first," Doc Henry objected.

"Yeah? How in hell could you tell in the dark which drew first? Damn Jewett, anyway, bringing in a hired gunman!"

Virginia Dake came through the crowd of men, her face tear-stained. She saw the body of her father and went down to her knees beside the body, her shoulders shaking.

Emma Dake stood at one end of the counter. She stared down at her husband, her face white and her lips trembling, but she didn't cry.

"Who done it?" she asked finally.

"Him," the marshal said, flicking a thumb toward Denver.

"You killed him?" Emma asked, facing Denver.

"He done it all right," grunted Blady, before Denver had a chance to answer.

"It don't matter, really," Emma went on slowly. "I been expectin' it for a long time, I guess. I waited for him all night last night, wonderin' if he'd come. I reckon he won't be home, ever, now."

She stepped over to Virginia and reached down to the girl's shoulders. She put her hands under the girl's arms and lifted her up.

"Come on, daughter. There ain't nothin' nobody can do now." She repeated it, "There ain't nothin' nobody can do now. There ain't no use cryin' about it." She glanced at Virginia, touched her cheek. "Virginia ain't well," she said irrelevantly, and paused.

She faced the circle of men.

"Johnny Dake was a good man. But he didn't amount to nothin'. He didn't do a man's job when he should of. He took the easy way. There ain't nothin' nobody can do now," she said for the third time. Then, "Why did you kill him?" she asked Denver.

"Ma'am, I didn't," Denver answered flatly.

She searched his eyes for a moment, then turned away, leading her sobbing daughter, her arm over the girl's shoulders.

"You can bury him now, if you want to," she said. "No preacher'll ever say anything over him."

It was quiet in the room for a few minutes, the words of the woman making a profound impression on the men.

Nate Hughes spoke first. His voice was smooth and soft.

"You aren't intending to hang him, are you?"

There was a murmur from the men around, some in assent and some in dissent.

The marshal expostulated, his round eyes wide, "Listen, boys, I can't allow you to do nothin' like that. The law'll hang him."

Hughes reached around him, lifted his gun and stuck it into his ribs.

"Now you can allow it, can't you?"

"Hell, yes. I can now. That makes it plumb legal. I ain't got a chance to protest any more."

"Listen, fellers," Jorganson said heavily. "I come to this here valley six years ago. I got my place and proved on it though Jewett's blocked everything I tried to do." He paused, and his voice raised in anger as he went on, "Well, I got a place now! And I had a stake o' money in the bank to carry me through until I could sell my beef. Now the bank's busted. That means I'm busted, too! Damn Jewett, anyway!" His eyes flashed. "I don't want to see Jewett get this feller off without payin'."

"That's what I say," Stuart rumbled.

"Take him down to the livery barn! Let's hang him there!" Shorty Yelt shouted.

Kate stood wide-eyed at the door, her face pale, her jaw determined. "You aren't going to hang him. He didn't do it!" she cried.

"Better not interfere," Hughes cautioned her, and crossed to stand beside the door.

"You can't do it!" Kate cried out again. "You've got to give him a chance!"

"Hell, what you fellers listenin' to her for! Just because he sparks up to her, she ain't got no sense—"

"Let's go," the marshal called roughly. "Somebody hold that woman."

Two of the ranchers took Kate by the arms, pulled her back into a chair and held her. "Go ahead," one of them ordered. "She'll stay."

The cavalcade started out, Denver forced to lead the way with half a dozen guns trained on his back. They walked down the wooden walk, their boots thumping heavily, the sound ominous in the silence.

They entered the wide doors of the livery stable. Mick ran ahead and dragged out a long length of rope.

"This all right, boys?" he asked.

"Sure."

They found a barrel in the back part of the livery stable, and stood it bottom up on the ground beneath the central beam. Nate Hughes called out to the men at the door:

"Bring that roan. We'll hang him with Jewett's horse."

"Marshal, you ought to know how to make a noose. Here," Jorganson said heavily.

"Sure. Give it here."

The marshal twisted the rope into the conventional hangman's noose with thirteen turns.

Jorganson looked at Denver. "I reckon we c'n let him stand trial, fellers, if he'll tell us where the rest o' the money is, can't we?"

The men looked at Denver expectantly. The tall man made no sign that he heard, but he fixed his cold eyes on Jorganson and said slowly:

"You're hangin' the wrong man, but if you're sure determined, I guess I can't stop you."

For a moment, none of the men moved. Jorganson broke the tension. He gestured toward the barrel. Denver walked over to it. Hughes slipped the noose over his head and Denver stepped upon the barrel. Hughes took a short piece of rope and tied Denver's hands behind him. A rancher tied the end of the rope to the horn of the saddle on the roan's back.

"Cinches tight?" asked someone.

The marshal lifted the stirrups and tested the cinch.

"Yeah, plenty."

"Well," old Stuart muttered, "let's get it over with."

No one started to get on the horse.

"You do it, marshal," a man suggested.

"Hell, it wouldn't be legal, not at all. I ain't officially got anything to do with it."

"Jorganson, you're man enough."

"Hell, somebody's got to do it," Jorganson muttered. He climbed heavily into the saddle.

"One of you fellers kick the barrel out from under him. I'll take up the slack. I ain't exactly experienced at this sort of thing."

Hughes stepped up, and put his foot on the edge of the barrel.

"Ready?" Hughes asked, after a pause. Jorganson nodded, and Hughes kicked over the barrel.

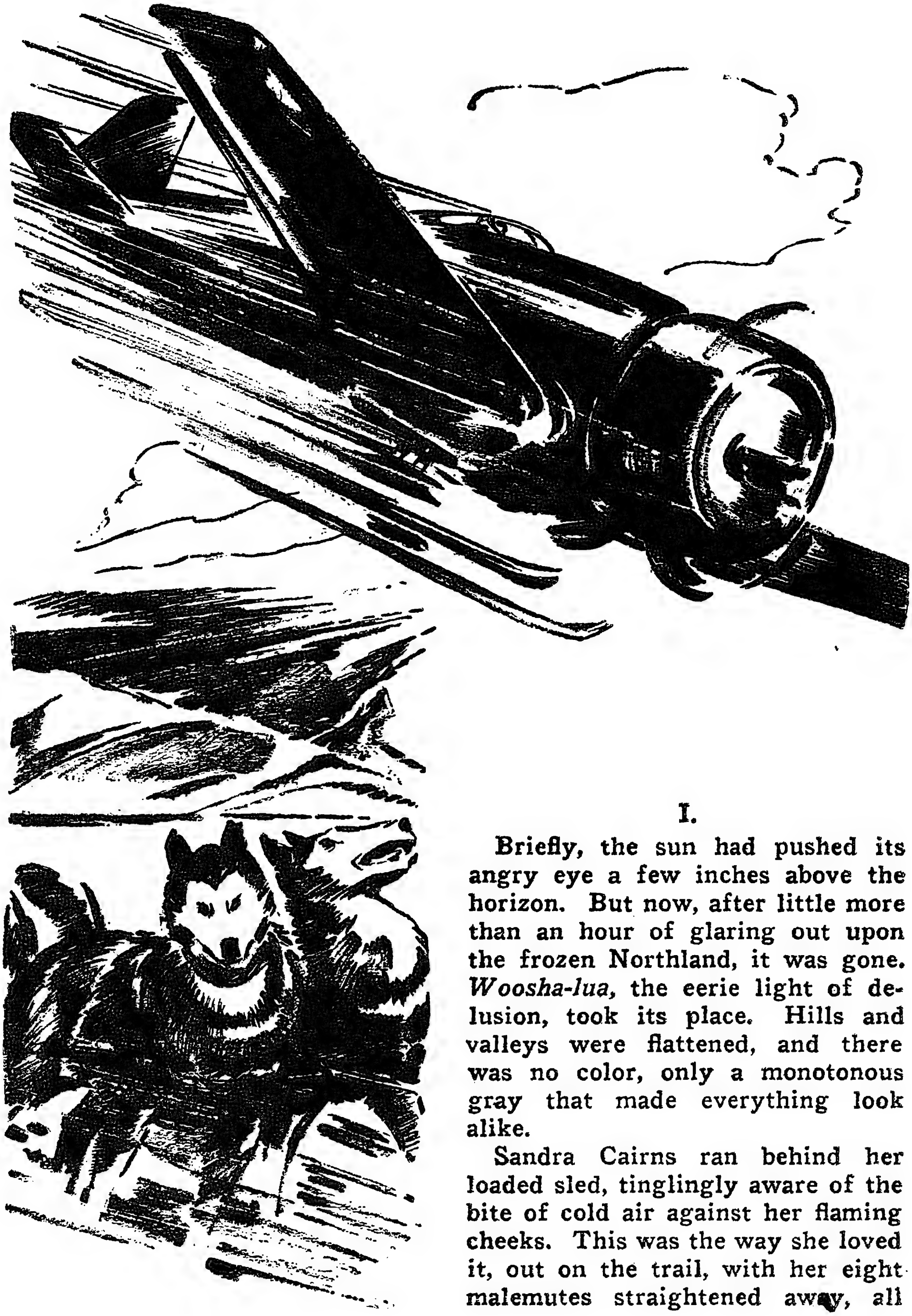
TO BE CONTINUED IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE.

A Stranger FROM OUTSIDE

by Scott Ellsworth

In the North country, Woosha-lua, the eerie light of delusion, gives everything a flat and level look.

NEWT ALFRED



I.

Briefly, the sun had pushed its angry eye a few inches above the horizon. But now, after little more than an hour of glaring out upon the frozen Northland, it was gone. *Woosha-lua,* the eerie light of delusion, took its place. Hills and valleys were flattened, and there was no color, only a monotonous gray that made everything look alike.

Sandra Cairns ran behind her loaded sled, tinglingly aware of the bite of cold air against her flaming cheeks. This was the way she loved it, out on the trail, with her eight malemutes straightened away, all pulling with equal loyalty and power on the towline, Tillicum—Chinook for friend—up in the lead position, responding to her occasional "Gee!" or "Haw!" with swift precision. Then the pullers mechanically followed, and sometimes Sandra jumped on the steel-shod brake, and so kept the sled from running upon the racing dogs at the rear.

"It's glorious!" she cried.

The words died. Tillicum had stopped—stopped dead. The other dogs also. Sandra grasped the handlebars and jumped on the brake.

In that first instant she had not realized what it was that had brought the team to a frozen stop. But now, after an instant of unearthly silence, she heard something—a strange, humming roar that seemed to come from high overhead. Not the honking of geese. There were no geese within a thousand miles at this time of the year. Not the cry of any wild thing she had ever heard.

The dogs were staring upward. Tillicum snarled and began to howl. The others joined in the wolf-dog chorus. And, in that instant, Sandra saw it—that great steel bird, flying at incredible speed.

She never had been Outside. And none of these evil contrivances ever before had come to her part of the interior country. Sandra instinctively drew in a deep breath, squared her slender shoulders and felt her hazel eyes narrow to slits. Her lips, usually soft and duskily red, were pressed into a straight, hard line.

"Oh-h-h!" she breathed. "How horrible!"

The steel bird was gone. It had swept over her, and now the soft gray of the winter sky swallowed it. The dogs pranced and snarled and Sandra cried mechanically, "Mush! Mush, you rascals!"

They were off. They hardly slackened speed until they swung into the beaten trail of the settlement. Sandra glanced to the left and saw, down on the frozen expanse of the river, the plane, with a dozen men in parkas and mukluks standing about it.

Mr. Rimrock, the storekeeper, came out of the post building and helped her carry in her bales of furs.

"Mebbe these pelts won't go South on the mail sled after all, Miss Sandy," he said. "See that new contraption down on the river? I reckon that guy is expecting to locate here, an' he'll git most of the freighting, no doubt."

Sandra didn't reply. So this new outlander would run the dogs and the sleds out of the country, would he? She'd have something to say about that!

But when, twenty minutes later, she met him, she had a moment of consternation. He was tall, well over six feet, and he had the shoulders and the flaming yellow hair of a viking. His eyes were blue, blue as glacier water, and Sandra Cairns saw in them the fanatical zeal of a prophet.

Men from the settlement followed him into the store. They brought a cloud of milky vapor with them. When it cleared, Rimrock said, "Miss Sandy, this is your new competitor. Didn't get your name, young fellow."

The man looked calmly down at Rimrock, then stared through steady blue eyes at Sandra.

"David Steel," he answered in a deep, confident voice. "Competitor? Tell me about it!"

Rimrock was going to reply, but Sandra spoke first. "I'm just a humble, old-fashioned dog musher, Mr. Steel. I saw you from out on the trail. My dogs howled at you!"

She hadn't intended to make that

last statement, certainly hadn't intended to make it so falteringly. But the spell of his masterful confidence was upon her.

He laughed, a soft, deep laugh. "Dog team!" he said. "I saw you. And I'll tell you something. I could have taken your whole outfit, dogs, sled, freight and you yourself, and flown one hundred miles while you were hobbling the short distance into town!"

Sandra felt cold and tired. It was probably true. Then she thought of Tillicum and the other dogs, friends and partners, faithful on many a hard trek, through mist and snow, through times of strong cold, when any break in the fierce onward drive of the malemutes would mean death.

"They would never let me down, and I'll fight for them!" she thought, and flashed a sudden, fierce challenge at David Steel.

So they stood, silent, with men grouped about them, staring at each other. No love lost, either. Enmity at first sight!

"You are a *chechaco,*" Sandra Cairns said softly. "You know a lot more about everything now than you will a month from today."

She turned and the heavily padded soles of her mukluks made no sound. Behind, she heard the low, deep laugh of David Steel.

The dogs lay curled up, with their bushy tails protecting their noses. They stood up, stretched and yawned when Sandra appeared. She drove to the dog barn back of Swede Mary's roadhouse, unhitched, and chained the malemutes in their stalls.

"Good boy!" she said with a pat as she chained each dog. "We'll fight him, won't we?"

Her blood was tingling again by the time she went through the storm shed at the front of the roadhouse, and into the big warm room with its moccasin racks, its homemade easy-chairs and its cherry-red heating stove. Swede Mary hurried in from a back room to help Sandra get out of her trail clothing.

"Hey, you hear about that new feller that's going to run an airyplane out of our town, Sandy?" Mary demanded briskly. "I expect you and the other mushers kin retire now!"

"I expect not!" Sandra retorted. "And don't talk to me about him. He's a conceited boor, and I hate him!"

She had a private room, opening off the rear hall. Now she went to it. Heat from a small stove made it warm, and Sandra sat down on the edge of her bunk and stared at the floor. Then she changed into her "dress-up" clothes—dainty underthings, a blue dress with short sleeves, silk stockings, and pumps to match the dress.

Part of her mind said critically, "Why dress up for him? And he may not come here, anyhow. He may board and room with Rimrock."

But David Steel did come, and when dinner was served on the long plank table, he sat opposite Sandra.

But he didn't look at her. He ate silently, answering questions when they were asked, but discouraging talk. His face was aloof, absorbed. Sandra saw again in his brooding eyes the look of the fanatic, the prophet of a new order.

Jim Jensen came in from a distant creek that week and sold his dogs to Dr. Howie, the cantankerous post doctor. Then Jim began to look around for means of returning to his camp.

Sandra was in the post store when Jim Jensen announced that he was in the market for transportation. Ordinarily, she would not have been interested. It would be a one-way haul, and Sandra usually managed to have a load both ways.

But David Steel was also in the store. He turned and looked down at the wizened little prospector.

"How far?" Steel demanded.

"Forty mile, mister," Jim Jensen said.

"Just give the word when you want to leave and I'll run you out. If I can find a landing space near your cabin it'll be a matter of a half-hour or so. We can eat dinner—"

"Ay don't tank so," Jensen broke in uneasily. "You see, mister, Ay want to get dar all in one piece!"

Steel flushed and a spark came into his blue eyes. "Do you think I'm in the habit of crashing?" he demanded. "How do you suppose I got here? I wasn't hauled in by a pack of cur dogs, I can tell you that!"

The usual winter loafers were sitting about on boxes and nail kegs. A moment of oppressive silence followed the new man's harsh speech. Sandra, her warm brown hair loose about her flushed, piquant face, listened, then spoke.

"I'll run you out, Mr. Jensen," she said. "I won't make it in a half-hour, and you will have to ride behind dogs—pure-breds, with a lineage any of us could be proud of."

Jim Jensen smiled broadly. "Any time you say, miss," he cackled. "Ay never ride behind dogs like yours before, Ay betcha!"

Sandra looked at David Steel. This was their first serious clash, and she had won, hands down. So Sandra drove Jensen out to his camp on Forty Mile Creek, and, coming back, she detoured to take in a trapper's cabin at the edge of the muskeg country, where she picked up two bales of furs. And, a week later, as she and the malamutes raced down the portage trail into the settlement, she instinctively looked up into the eerie gray sky for the great steel bird she had seen on her last homeward-bound trip. But there was nothing but infinite grayness and silence.

In town she saw the plane, covered with canvas, down on the river, and she saw David Steel.

He sat by himself, obviously taking no part in the desultory talk of the other men in the post store. He glanced up as Sandra came lithely in, looked gloomily at her, then again stared at the floor. Sandra felt a queer shiver of sympathy. He looked miserable.

Impulsively, she walked over and spoke. "Mr. Steel, I'm sorry I cut you out of that job," she said. "I really didn't need it. But you spoke so harshly of my dogs—"

"Not yours in particular, as I remember it," Steel broke in. "Just dogs, cur dogs, in general. But don't worry about me. I'm here to win, and before I get through, there won't be a sled dog in this part of Alaska!"

Although she sensed the hurt that made him speak so harshly, her cheeks flooded with angry color. She looked steadily at him.

"Poor *chechaco!*" she murmured. "You still haven't learned anything, have you?"

His big hands, lying slack on his knees, slowly closed into fists. And Sandra Cairns knew that if she had been a man, David Steel would have struck her.

With defiantly swaying shoulders, she turned back toward the door. The men about the big red stove hadn't spoken, but Sandra knew they were backing her. Not for nothing was she a native daughter. Steel didn't know that, and if he had known he wouldn't have understood. But to Sandra it meant that he hadn't a chance in the world. She was of the Northland, and he wasn't.

That day she rejoiced fiercely and a little cruelly in her victory. She had given him insult for insult. He ate at the big table in Swede Mary's roadhouse, and Mary waited on him, made a fuss over him. She glanced reproachfully at Sandra, who tried to look as if she didn't know there was such a person on earth.

The next day Sandra didn't feel quite so comfortable, and before the week was out she began to droop. This big fellow with the broad shoulders and the fighting blue eyes was taking it the hard way. He was brooding! He hung about the store, and one day Sandra saw him buy a bottle of whiskey and take a long drink of the fiery liquid.

She stood with parted lips and wide eyes, staring. David Steel looked heavily at her, then smiled, raised the bottle, inclined his head and drank again.

Sandy felt her face burning. She walked over to where he sat.

"Shame on you!" she cried. "Trying to muddle your brains with that stuff! I thought you came here to win. Do you think that is going to help any?"

She pointed an accusing finger at the bottle. Steel stared down at it, then shrugged, walked over to the stove and threw bottle and whiskey into the fire.

"Is that what you want, Miss Morality?" he asked as he faced Sandra again.

"I . . . I was a fool to interfere," she stammered, and bit her lip when she felt tears springing into her eyes.

Business was slack, or so Sandra told herself. She stayed in the settlement, miserably aware, every waking moment, of the tragic figure of her unsuccessful competitor.

Day by day, David Steel looked more gloomy and hopeless. He was the kind, Sandra realized, who could fight cold and danger, any definite hardship, without flinching, enjoying every instant of the battle. But this intangible thing—this invisible wall which held him from advancing an inch—was too much for him. He showed strain, and Sandra suddenly saw an answering expression in her own tragic, piquant face, when it stared out at her from her mirror. Faint blue circles showed round her hazel eyes. Her lips were drawn down at the corners.

"You little fool," she whispered. "What do you care?"

Then a startled look came into the wide eyes looking out at her from the mirror. And Sandy Cairns turned abruptly and stumbled to a chair. There, for a long time, she sat with her face in her hands, her shoulders quivering.

She washed her face in melted snow water. Her eyes didn't look red any longer. She ate the noon meal and noted, although she looked most of the time at her plate, that David Steel was not in his usual place.

She hesitated, after the others had gone, then asked Swede Mary what had become of him.

"How would I know, Miss Cairns?" Mary asked stiffly. "I expect he's looking for a different boardinghouse. The way he's been treated here, by some folks that I expected better of, would be tough even for a Siwash dog!"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Sandra said, almost in a whisper. "I—"

"Yes, you!" Swede Mary snapped. "Don't you think he's human? Don't you think the sight of a girl like you— Don't pretend you don't know you're pretty, don't pretend you don't mean to draw him on—"

"Oh, Mary!" Sandra cried. "I never— Why, it's ridiculous. All Mr. Steel and I disagree about is his miserable airplane and my beautiful, faithful dogs!"

Mary looked pityingly at Sandra.

"You little fool," she said, echoing Sandra's own comment to the mirror. "How little you know about men and women and the human heart!"

She turned and went shuffling back toward her kitchen. And Sandra stood there, staring at nothing, seeing the despairing face of a man with blue eyes and bright-gold hair.

She went down into the tiny business portion of the settlement that afternoon. Sandra Cairns was doing a bit of high-pressure promoting.

She talked to every business and professional man in town about traveling by plane.

"We've got to be more up to date," she said. "After all, the airplane is here to stay. Listen, I want you to give this man a chance. Go somewhere, and let him take you!"

Her last visit was at the office of Dr. Howie. The grizzled, blunt-spoken Scot stared solemnly at her while she talked. Then a sudden smile, surprisingly gentle, twisted his dry features.

"Sandy, my child—weel, I won't say what I was aboot to say. I'm no doctor of sick hearts, unless it's valvular. But—weel, I'll think aboot it. Nay, child, I'll do better than thot! I'll let your young man do—"

"He's not my young man!" Sandra flared.

He looked at her and shook his head. "I've no doot ye think ye're telling me the truth," he said. "But, in ony case, I'll give him a job. This verra day, Sandy, my girl!"

And, an hour later, standing on the loading platform of the post store, Sandra saw Dr. Howie climb into the cockpit of the plane grounded so long down on the river and heard the angry roar of the engine as David Steel rocketed it, to break the landing skis free from the snow. Then she saw it go taxiing away into the weird gray light, the *woosha-lua,* the light of delusion.

II.

An hour after she had gone to bed, Sandra heard someone pounding on her door. She slid into slippers and a quilted robe.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Open up, Sandy—this is Mary. You've got to get out your dogs. Hurry, hurry!"

Sandra slid back the bolt. "Whatever is the matter?" she demanded.

"It's Dr. Howie—he's had his arm broken, Sandy! Something went wrong when Mr. Steel tried to land!"

Sandra had the dogs harnessed in less than ten minutes. They had been on chains for days and were in a frenzy of impatience. They went racing down the main street, avoiding stumps by inches, and struck the slightly raised bank of the river. The sled went up and pancaked to the ice.

Then they were straightened away into the night.

Sandra had her driving directions—a miner's cabin ten miles out. She made it in well under an hour and found Dr. Howie sitting in front of the stove his arm in a sling.

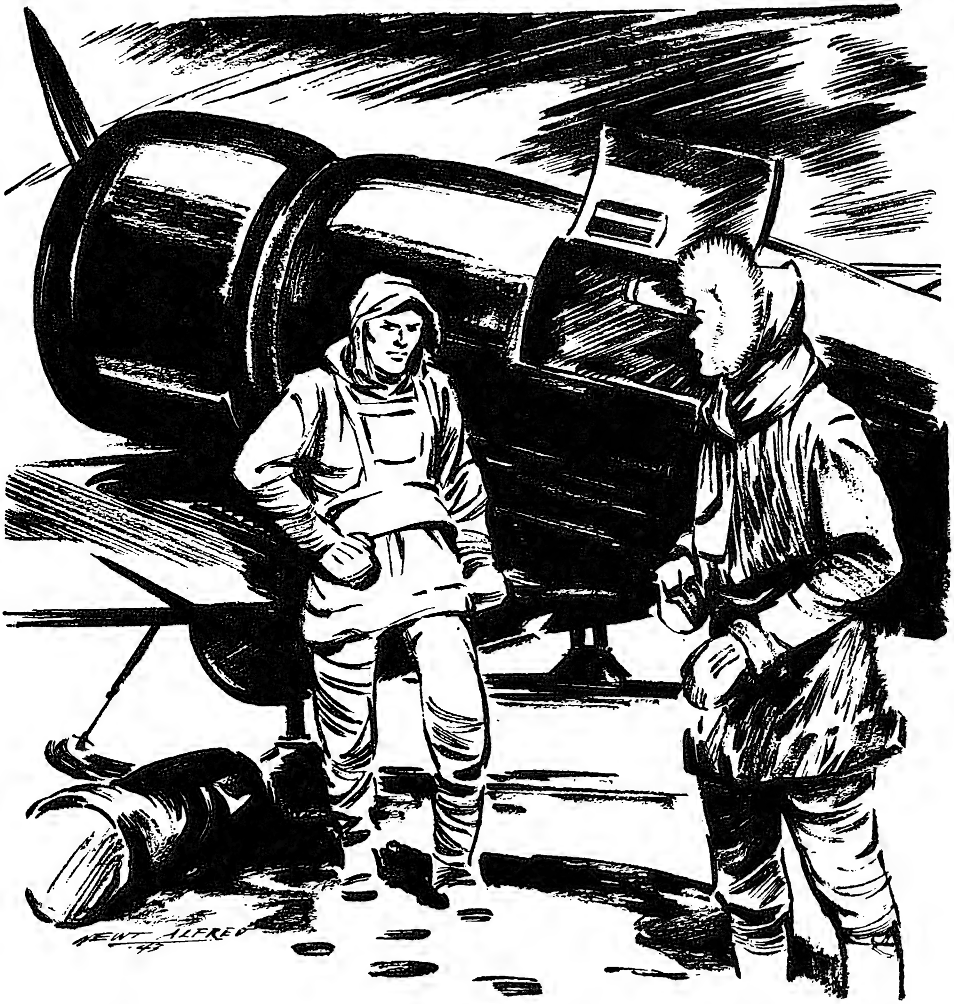
He looked grimly at her. "I would na ride back with him, child," he said. "Happen he told you to fetch me?"

"Mary told me, doctor," Sandra answered miserably. "Oh, this will ruin his chances. No one will dare trust him again!"

"Happen not," Howie said. "Weel, my arm will mend."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't ask—"

He gave her another of his rare, gentle smiles. "I'm worried more aboot you an' yeer young mon—No, dinna tell me thot again! He is yours, whether you want him or not! He told me—"



He raised his head and stared at her. "You mean you can't go on?" he exclaimed. "But you've got to! I've failed and you've got to get that serum through to save that whole settlement!"

Sandra stared, then turned slowly away. "Well?" she whispered.

" 'Twas under the seal of professional confidence, Sandy," the doctor said. "But I geethered that he thowt ye were fairly good-looking, and had certain qualities that might please some men. But he did admit that he despises dogs!"

That was a tonic for Sandra. "Well!" she exclaimed sharply. "You'd have done better, it seems, if you'd trusted to dogs instead of to that . . . that monstrosity he thinks is so wonderful!"

But that was a flash in the pan, and by next day she was back at her attempted proselyting. Now, with Dr. Howie marching dourly about town with his arm in a sling, the case looked hopeless.

And David Steel was hard hit. There was a look of tragic wonder in his blue eyes when Sandra next saw him. He came in late to dinner, perhaps hoping that the other diners would have departed.

But Sandra Cairns sat there, a slender girl with shining brown hair and bright-hazel eyes, but with pathetically downturned lips.

He stood behind his chair and looked down at her. "Oh, it's you," he muttered. "I understand you got me that job yesterday. Thanks a lot."

"I'm sorry you had bad luck," Sandy said.

It was the wrong thing to say. He flushed to the eyes. "Don't worry about me, my friend," he told her savagely. "It was bad luck, but I'll live it down. The light fooled me!"

"Woosha-lua!" Sandy murmured, trying to sound sympathetic.

"What?"

"Woosha-lua! That means light of delusion. It makes everything look flat and level."

He didn't look at Sandra again. And, after a time, feeling very small and helpless, she stood up and left the room.

Men laughed at her now when she asked them to give David Steel a job. "Not likely, Sandy," Hickox, the free trader, said. "I can understand your point of view! He's a nice-looking lad enough—"

Sandra stamped her moccasin. "I think men are abominable!" she cried. "All of you insinuating—"

Hickox looked at her and shook his head sadly. "All right, Miss Sandra," he said. "You're doing it just because you want to see sled dogs run off the trails. But I'm not going to help you. I'll have some freighting for you sometime next week. Will you do it?"

She went back to the roadhouse, cooked a meal of fish, rice and tallow for the malemutes, and went to her room.

For a long time she lay on her bed, fully dressed, eyes wide open and part of the time misty. Swede Mary knocked at supper time, but Sandra called to her that she had a headache and had gone to bed. Later, she fell asleep.

Again she was awakened by clamorous knocking. Mary's voice shouted to her:

"Sandy . . . Sandy, get up! You'll have to hit the trail, child!"

Sandra slid to the floor and crossed to the door.

"Why, you're all dressed!" Mary gasped. "But those clothes won't do. Get into your trail rig, Sandy. An Indian runner has just come in from that settlement up on the icicle—disease has broken out, and Doc Howie wants to send up some serum!"

By the time Sandra reached the doctor's office, half the men in town were standing around in the thirty-below-zero air outside, talking with the runner who had brought word of the epidemic. Sandra entered the front office.

Dr. Howie stood, bandaged arm and all, in the rear doorway. He faced David Steel, who towered in front of him.

As Sandra closed the door, Dr. Howie said, "All right, if that's the way ye feel aboot it. But no more crashing, young fellow! I'll give ye half the serum and give Miss Sandy, here, the rest!"

Steel whirled. His face looked white and stiff. He stared with bitter intensity at Sandra.

"And may the best mon win!" Dr. Howie added.

Sandra didn't look again at David Steel. He was hateful! She wished she had never met him, or tried to help him. She took the small package the physician held toward her.

"Give it to John Gibbs, the mission doctor," Dr. Howie directed. "And remember, Sandy, my lass, a hundred lives depend on this medicine's getting there in time!"

Sandra refreshed her remembrance of the route she was to follow by speaking briefly with the Indian runner. Then she untied the sled and picked up her dog whip.

She waved her arms—the musher's traditional farewell—shouted, "Mush!" and the dogs were off.

At first the wind was from the southwest and mist enveloped the dogs until Sandra Cairns could see only a cloud of gray vapor moving ghostlike before her. But down on the river trail she had nothing to worry about. Tillicum knew the road.

As she passed the plane she saw a tall figure, muffled in parka, mittens and scarf, moving swiftly about. Minutes later, the malemutes gave banshee shrieks of rage, as if the thing moving swiftly overhead, with drumming motors, were an hereditary enemy of the malemute clan.

Sandra also looked up. Her eyes shone like stars. Again she had forgotten her pique. She smiled, a tender smile that would have made Dr. Howie shake his head.

"Good luck, David!" she whispered.

Not that she was going to lie down on her part of the job. Steel ought to get through before she had left the river. He could sail around her for the next two hours and then make off, like an eagle heading for its aerie at sundown, and be there. Just like that. And if he did, all right, but she'd try to give him a race.

"Mush, you darlings!" she cried exultantly, and felt the sharp, dry air burning her eyes.

The stars had shone, many-colored and intensely bright, when she left the settlement. Now they were hidden, and when she looked up Sandra could see gray clouds scudding close to the tops of the spruce trees on her right.

On and on she went. Then she saw close ahead the great blanched fir tree the Indian runner had told her of. She jumped on the brake and shouted to Tillicum.

"Gee! Gee, big fellow!"

He yelped back at her and took the turn so sharply that Sandra was nearly whipped off the rear of the whirling sled. But she clung to the handlebars and saw the mist

DON'T BE CHEEKY, MISTER!
WHY NOT? I SHAVE WITH STAR BLADES!
6NX PROCESS
STAR
DOUBLE EDGE
4 for 10¢
STAR
SINGLE EDGE

cloud that raced with the dogs move up into the portage trail.

On and on. Now minutes had lengthened to hours, and once or twice the malemutes had wanted to slow to a trot. But always Sandra cried to them, "Mush, you darlings!" and the dogs leaped forward again at racing speed.

Here, with the black spruce timber closing in on both sides, it was gloomy and dark. But the trail had been broken, and Sandra didn't have to dig out her snowshoes and mush ahead.

On and then out of the forest, with a gray level stretch of open tundra ahead—and something huge and indistinct in the mist.

Sandra shouted to the dogs, brought them to a stand. She stood very straight and still, staring at that vague outline.

A plane—*the* plane—here?

"Mush!" she said in so unsteady a voice that Tillicum shook himself till his trail bell pealed.

The dogs trotted forward and began to howl. They recognized the huge, ugly thing they had seen in the sky. Sandra drew in alongside and saw David Steel leaning with slumped shoulders and bowed head against the plane.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Grounded. Fog. Can't go on!"

There was bitter despair in his voice. Sandra felt the tears in his aching throat. She wanted to run to him, to put her arms around him. This was the tragic end of his eager dream of bringing air travel into the interior country.

And she sensed the danger of an explosion. She was walking over dynamite. Any open show of sympathy—

She turned and looked toward the trees. The rigid branches were beginning to stir. Hastily, she stripped down her scarf and felt the wind whip past her hot cheeks. Whip past, but now from the northwest!

She spoke casually. "Lucky I blundered upon you, Mr. Steel," she said. "One of my dogs, my leader, has frozen feet. We got into some overflow water—"

He raised his head and stared. "You mean you can't go on?" he exclaimed. "Don't talk nonsense. I've failed, and you've got to go through!"

Sandra wouldn't look at Tillicum. She was sure he knew how she had lied about him. She walked slowly toward David Steel.

"The wind is changing," she said quietly. "By the time you get my outfit aboard—you said you could carry us all, you know—and get your engine warmed up, the mist will have cleared!"

He straightened away from the plane. He was staring at her, and even in the gray twilight she could feel the burn of his eyes.

"You're sure? You're not trying to . . . to—"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous! I'm trying to get you into motion!" she cried. "A hundred Indians will be dead if we don't make it! And you can do it!"

She heard him laugh, a deep, savage laugh. She helped him get the dogs and sled into his ship. She heard the rocketing motor, felt the hull vibrate. Then they were off.

Steel circled over the camp, headed north and came back up the long dark plane of the river. His plane settled gently down. It glided forward, came to a stop.

Sandra handed him her package of medicine. He strode away and presently returned with John Gibbs, the mission doctor, at his side. The two stopped talking as they came close to the plane.

Gibbs thrust his head inside and nodded to Sandra. "So you got stuck, miss?" he said, beginning to laugh. "That's a good one!"

Sandra felt her heart miss a beat.

David Steel looked inside. "Might as well get out," he told her harshly.

"But I'm not going to! You've got to take me and my dogs back home. I told you—"

"Don't lie to me again!" he rasped. "This man just told me—"

"Dr. Gibbs doesn't know anything about it!" Sandra wailed. "And I shan't get out! You've got to take me and my dogs home!"

He stood watching her. Then he turned and she saw him walking around the plane. He stared up at the wings, tapped one of them, and came back.

David Steel laughed, a short, mocking laugh. "All right, lady," he said. "I'll take you home, or try to. Remember, you asked for it!"

He started the engine, then was in his seat at the controls. The plane glided down the ice. It gathered speed and raised like a trumpeter swan, but more heavily and unsteadily, Sandra realized, than on the previous start.

She sat back, unhappy and frightened, she didn't know of what. The dogs began to whine. Tillicum climbed over the others and licked her face.

They were far up, and again the mist had gathered. Somehow, David Steel's plane seemed heavy, seemed to be floundering through the night. Again Sandra thought of his bright dream, and of the hoodoo that had pursued him. If she could only teach him—

Her cheeks turned hot and she bit her lip. Teach him? He hated her! Then, in an instant, she came out of her troubled reverie and tried to stand up.

The plane was tilted far over to one side. It shivered and rocked like a wounded thing. Then it was falling!

Sandra saw David Steel spring from his low seat. He whirled and caught her in his arms.

"Darling," he cried, "forgive me! I knew—the wings were coated over with ice. But I was crazy—"

Then they struck. There was a rending of fabric, and Sandra was torn out of Steel's arms and hurled into a great shaft of blackness and silence. In that last moment she felt his lips on her cold, trembling ones.

She opened her eyes and blinked. She was in her room, was lying in her own bunk, with its heaps of blankets and lynx hides. And Swede Mary, her eyes red and puffy, sat at the bedside.

"Sandy . . . Sandy, my own little pet!" Mary sobbed. "But he didn't kill you, nor any of your dogs. They're in the barn, darling, and I've fed them. Tillicum is whining for you."

Sandra struggled up to her elbow. "David!" she whispered feverishly. "Mr. Steel! Where—"

"May all the devils fly away with Mr. Steel!" Swede Mary shouted. "He's all right, and he's going away from here! Today, Sandy. We'll be well rid of him!"

Sandra pushed the older woman aside, got up and dressed. "When is he going?" she demanded.

"This afternoon. He's waiting at the store. I'm to send Cumtux John with his Huskies to get him and take him to Yakut. From there he thinks he can get a plane—one that will fly!"

Sandra stood listening. Then she got into her trail clothing. "I'm Cumtux John," she said. "And I'll take Mr. David Steel where I think he ought to go!"

Snow whirled down the main street of the town as Sandra swung in the malemutes in front of Rimrock's store. She had the lynx fur rim of her parka hood pulled well forward, and her scarf covered everything but her eyes. Dog whip in hand, she stood impassively while her passenger came out slowly, glanced indifferently at her and climbed into the box sled.

She didn't cry, "Mush!" this time. She just sent the long lash flickering out till the tip gently touched Tillicum's right ear. The lead dog snarled, but he understood.

Out in that white smother and down over the river bank to the ice. Sandra's passenger sat with bowed head, indifferent to his surroundings.

A half-hour later he sat up and shook the snow off his hood. He stared ahead. The malemutes were slowing, and there, partly buried in the white downpour, stood a desolate-looking airplane.

The man in the basket sled tried to scramble erect. He was bumped down by a forward lurch, then made it. The dogs came to a stop.

Sandra stepped off the brake and advanced. Impatiently, she whipped away her muffler.

She faced him, chin high, eyes blazing. "Yes, it's I—Sandra!" she said huskily. "I'm ashamed of you! That's why I brought you here—to see the thing you wanted to abandon. Do you think I'd turn my back on my dogs, go away and leave them to strangers, just because they'd had bad luck? David Steel, if your heart is not as hard as your name—"

She couldn't go through with it! She'd planned it all, had rehearsed it, but with his wondering eyes fixed on her pale, quivering face, and that look of wonder turning to hope and then to joy—

He had her up off the ice, and the dogs had gone wild and were all for mobbing him.

"Down! Down, Tillicum, Dexter! Down, you darlings!" Sandra cried, and struggled to free herself. Then she stopped struggling and lay against him, breathing softly, not thinking anything, just feeling.

"If you meant what you called me when your plane was falling—" she whispered.

"Did I mean it? But I'm no good—everything I try to do ends in tragedy!"

She threw a soft arm around his neck. "Not everything, *chechaco!*" she whispered. "And you can learn! I'll teach you about the weather and the light, and we'll use my dogs and your plane!"

He raised her until he could find her lips. He said, "*Chechaco.* That means someone from Outside? And you're a . . . a—"

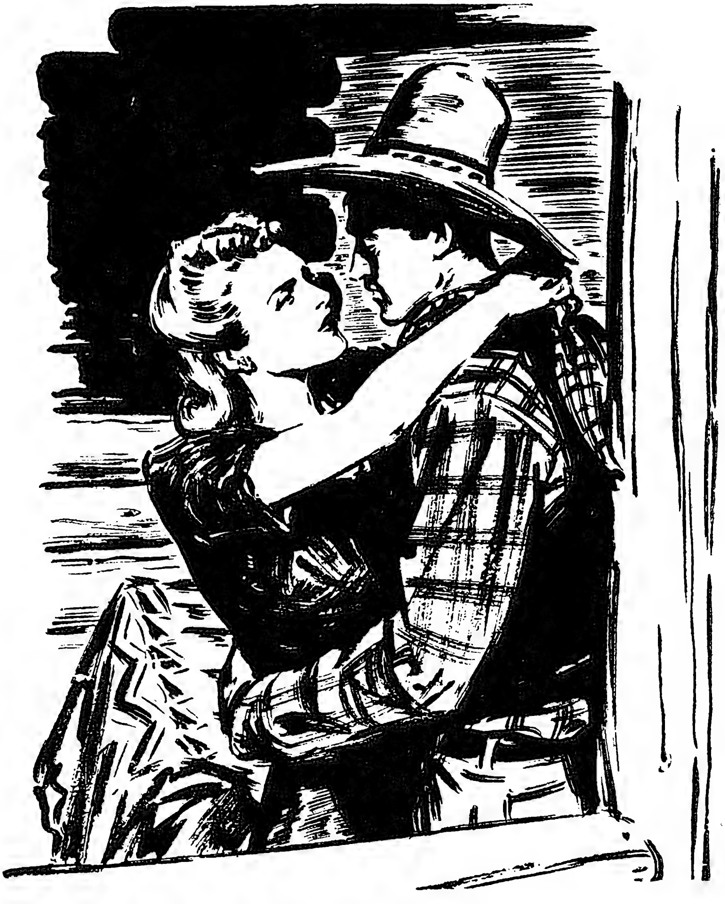
"A sourdough," Sandra whispered.

"A darling little sourdough!" David Steel corrected her. "And again, sweetheart, you've asked for it! I'm staying, and you've got to teach me the ropes!"

THE END.

SINGING COWBOY

He was Bill McFee of the sage flats and the lonely trails, of distant places and the open range.



by Tom W. Blackburn

The heavy big car slowed, its tires whining, and slewed off the highway and through the arched gateway onto the lane leading back through the hills to the Tall Hat Ranch. Sitting on a rock back from the gate, Mary Mason stirred.

"Eight!" She said it aloud, a slow and festering bitterness in her voice. A rod away from her seat, Groundhog, her old pony, nodded his head in drowsy sympathy. Four or five miles away, up where Highway 66 looped around a shoulder of

Big Williams Mountain, starting down the timbered valley on its eventual way to Ashfork, another car appeared. Mary watched it without interest at first. But as it drew closer, she saw it was different from the others. And its driver was having trouble. She leaned a little forward, listened to the uneven, loping sound of its exhaust. Half a mile away, the car seemed to catch hold of itself and begin to pur. But it didn't pick up speed. As it neared the gate of the Tall Hat, it slowed even more.

Mary could see the man behind the wheel, looking up at the blatant lettering Doreen Thorpe had hung across the gateway a week after her father's will had been read. Mary couldn't see much about him except that he wore a big Stetson which didn't look stiff and brushed and fresh from a store shelf in Flagstaff like those on the occupants of the other cars which had already turned in. The man was a stranger to her, but he wore the badge of her country as if he were used to it. Her interest sharpened.

The car had once been a good one. But it had been a lot of places since it was new. It had the tried and comradely look that old Groundhog had acquired in his years of faithful service. The man stopped at the head of a little dip in front of the gate and shut off his engine. Swinging a long leg out over the door of the car, he lighted a cigarette and let his gaze swing out along the rim of the country back of Big Williams. He seemed trying to decide something.

When his smoke was done, he swung his leg inside, released his brake, and the car started to roll. He let out the clutch and the engine started turning over. The car coughed twice, jerked, and died at the foot of the dip. The man stepped on the starter. It ground over aimlessly a few times and died, also. Its driver sat motionless for a moment. Then he opened the door and got out. When Mary reached him, he had the hood up, had his elbows braced on the fender and his chin in his hands, staring with a mild, unhurried interest at the grimy engine.

"Trouble?" Mary asked him. She knew it was a foolish question. But she also knew that friendliness is carried more by tone than words. The man seemed to know it, too. He turned his head as far as he could without lifting his chin from his hands. Mary saw he was not handsome. His face was too bony. But there were weather wrinkles about his eyes. And he had the smile of a man who used one a lot.

"Looks like it," he agreed cheerfully. "Either I'm out of gas or old *Roamer*, here, has better judgment than I have. He just plain wouldn't go through that gate! Look, miss, do you know anything about this Tall Hat layout?"

Mary nodded. The man pushed back his hat.

"You hear the blamedest things! A gent talked quite a spell while I was having breakfast in Flagstaff this morning. The way he had it, old Jeb Thorpe, who built this place up, had a daughter of his own and another he had adopted when she was a baby. One pretty and the other plain. The girls didn't get along. The old man tried to fix it when he died. He gave the pretty one the home ranch and all his operating cash. He gave the plain one all the acreage and grazing land. He tried to fix it so they'd have to patch things up and get along together to keep the ranch going."

He stopped, plainly waiting for addition or correction. Mary said nothing, keeping a perfect poker face. He grinned and went on:

"Appears the pretty girl is as smart as she's good-looking. She beat her sister and the old man, both. She forgot about the grazing land and calmly turned the home place into a dude ranch. A fancy one, too, if the invitation I got means anything!"

He pawed in a jacket pocket and brought out a rumpled, engraved card. He smoothed it and began to read:

> **"Miss Doreen Thorpe requests the pleasure of Mr. William Stirling McFee's attendance at the gala opening of the Tall Hat, where carefree Arizona days blend with gay Broadway nights. U. S. Highway 66, Arizona, between Williams and Ashfork."**

He stopped and looked quizzically at Mary.

"Is this the McCoy?" he asked. "If the thing's good, if it's on the level, I don't want to miss it. This is vacation for me and I'm looking for fun. But I don't want to get clipped in a one-horse layout or a family duel. *Roamer* seems to think I should stay on the highway."

Mary's mind was wheeling dizzily. William Stirling McFee! Doreen was a cool planner. This was part of her plan. Bill McFee, the singing cowboy who had silenced the scorn and the jokes heaped on his predecessors. A man with a beautiful voice who refused to sing anything but American songs, songs from the range. Doreen had brought him here to trap him. She planned to make her venture secure by billing Bill McFee at the Tall Hat—permanently. Next year the opening invitations would read: "Doreen and Bill McFee request your presence—"

Words trembled on her lips, words of warning. But she couldn't voice them. She and Doreen were practically sisters—they had been, all through childhood. Jeb Thorpe had wanted them to be. Jeb Thorpe knew where the trouble lay. That was why he had given Mary the grazing lands, the meat and bones of the ranch. He had counted on her to hold the Tall Hat together, to bring Doreen back into line, to make peace. Bill McFee sensed her hesitation. He tried to make a joke of it.

"Man to man, I want a straight steer," he grinned. "If I'm apt to get tangled with the plain sister with a lot of grass and no roof, warn me off. But if there's a chance at the beauty with the house and the brains, flag me on!"

Mary knew he was laughing. But she colored deeply. Doreen was beautiful. If that was what he wanted, let him have it. She had been on the point of offering to ride down three miles to old Clarey's roadside stand for a couple of gallons of gasoline. Instead, she tilted up her chin and pulled on her gloves.

"It's four miles down the lane to the Tall Hat. Half the way it's shady. They'll send someone out for your car from there, Mr. McFee!"

The man was still standing under the gate, his hat back and his eyes following her as Mary swung up to leather on Groundhog's back and turned into the timber.

Mary circled the Tall Hat yard and rode into the corral. Hanging Groundhog's gear on its peg in the saddle shed, she turned the old animal into the corral and went up the back way to the house. Doreen had been nastily sweet about letting her keep her old quarters on the second floor of the big, rambling house. But there'd be an end to that, too. And that knowledge added to her bitterness. Doreen Thorpe was justly old Jeb's daughter. She had the old man's forcefulness and his way of getting what she wanted. There was nothing really wrong about Doreen but her vanity. Mary's broad streak of honesty made her admit this.

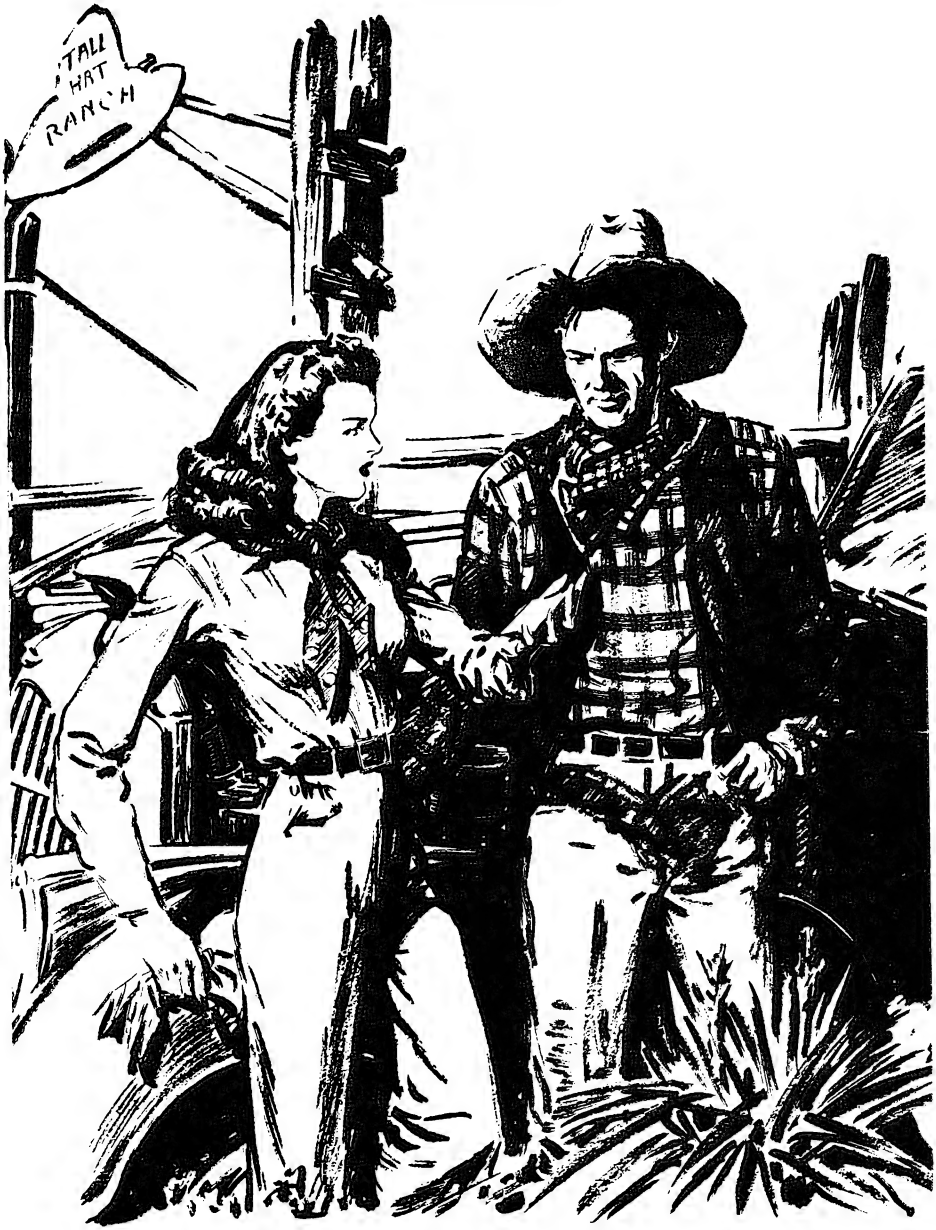
What was out of place in Doreen, what she had failed to inherit from her father, was a sense of values which came with the country in which she had come back to live. Her billing for the Tall Hat showed that plainly enough—"The Tall Hat, where carefree Arizona days blend with gay Broadway nights"! Doreen had come back from her schooling in the East with the East's standards, instead of the ones to which she had been born. The Tall Hat was a place she had inherited and from which she must make her living. Nothing more. She couldn't see that every acre, every mile of fence, almost every head of stock were milestones her father had painstakingly erected through the long years of his life. She couldn't see that the Tall Hat was a ranch, whole in itself, which would be destroyed if it were partitioned. She couldn't see the defilement of making a glorified roadhouse out of the buildings which had been her childhood home.

Doreen Thorpe wanted fun, the glamour of interesting, glittering people about her. She wanted to play queen among them—a willowy, admired, sought-after hostess who attracted only the brightest of lights around her. If Jeb Thorpe had left her a million dollars, she would have given her sister the Tall Hat, lock, stock and barrel, without a second thought. She would have gone back to New York and played hostess in an ornate chamois-skin paneled apartment. But Jeb Thorpe's wealth had been in achievements, in friends and land and affection. His fund of operating cash had been barely enough for Doreen to make the changes needed to remodel the Tall Hat into a falsely glittering playground. So she had made the best of her desires with the means her father had left her.

Mary knew she didn't resent the fact that Jeb had left his land to his other daughter. Doreen would have been helpless in the face of the responsibility of keeping up the ranch. She had the old house, its atmosphere of the genuine, fading West of her father's time, and enough land to give an impression of spaciousness. It was enough for her. With these things she could have what she wanted. And with these things she could wreck the ranch.

Mary changed clothes wearily. Sliding into a tanned, natural leather riding skirt and jacket, she pulled on a pair of beaded half-boots and went across to her mirror. It was a small mirror, not like the plated full-length one in Doreen's room. But it was honest. It told her that her ride had freshened her color and cleared her eyes. It told her that her hair had shaken out until it lay in a jet, loosely curled cascade down her back. And, as always, it told her that gossip was true. Doreen was the beautiful, and she the plain of the two sisters.

Turning back toward the room, Mary saw a pair of new Levis folded across a chair. On top of them lay a gaudy, cheap shirt of plaid wool, factory-tailored, and far too heavy for the warmth of summer weather. She was staring curiously at the clothing when her door opened and Doreen slid in. Ahead of her traveled a heady aura of perfume. She was dressed in a low-cut, sheath-like black satin gown. Its severity and its strong contrast to the milky fairness of her skin and the full gold of her hair made a vivid picture. It caught Mary in spite of herself. Doreen saw the admiration on her face and smiled with a false graciousness. Then the smile faded and she looked petulantly at her sister.



"Is this thing the McCoy?" he asked Mary. "If the thing's on the level, I don't want to miss it. But I don't want to get clipped in a one-horse layout or a family duel."

"That leather!" she protested. "Mary, you promised not to interfere if you stayed on at the house. I have to remind you. Look, I want Western atmosphere tonight. Real atmosphere. Cowgirls and cowboys!"

Mary eyed Doreen's gown and smiled. "I see!" she said.

Doreen colored. "I'm hostess.

That's different. The boys are all dressed, and Sam Hopper looks like Tom Mix—you should see him. That's what I want. That's why I sent some stuff up here for you. Put it on, please, before you come down."

Mary looked at the clothes on the chair. Then she shook her head.

"Levis came out of books and pictures, Doreen," she said quietly. "I never wore a pair in my life. But I had my first leather riding outfit the first day I climbed on a horse. If I'm not Western enough for your little game downstairs, I'll stay away. I saw the people who were in all nine cars that turned in and I won't be missing anything!"

"Nine cars!" Doreen snapped. "Only eight—" She stopped, sudden color rising. "Nine—then it was you who talked to Bill McFee at the gate! You're right. You had better stay away tonight. And don't be so snooty about those people! I was in luck. I sent Sam Hopper down to the Ceremonials at Gallup last week, and he found out who was there. I made my list of invitations from his list—Otto Petliz, the director; Tommy Bowen and half of his orchestra; Jan Thiebold, No. 1 in Hollywood, now; Louisa de Fries with him. Then there's Cora Crane, the newspaper's Little Bird Among the Stars' columnist, and Bill McFee. With McFee singing, maybe even broadcasting, and maybe Tommy Bowen's music, Petliz, Thiebold and Louisa de Fries listening, and mention in Cora Crane's column, I'm made, Mary. Nothing is going to happen to spoil it, now! Will you mind not coming down?"

"Does it make any difference if I do?"

Doreen's saccharine smile flashed briefly.

"No!" she said, and closed the door behind her.

Mary ate dinner early with Tom Chee, the old cook of the Tall Hat, in the kitchen. Even at that hour, the two waiters Doreen had brought in from Winslow were busy with trays and glasses. There was considerable laughter and high talk in the front part of the house. Mary smiled ruefully. She had seen Doreen do that before—keep a whole party in gay spirits for a couple of hours. She did it well. Bright small talk and sharp, acrid humor. But Doreen would run down after a little, like an overworked well, and what would happen, then?

Her meal finished, Mary went out into the yard, intending to walk down to the creek and watch the sunset. But Sam Hopper stopped her before she'd gone a dozen paces.

"All right, girl!" he snapped at her. "This isn't your preserve. Back to the house!"

Mary was too astonished to feel anger at his curtness. Doreen had put it mildly when she had said Sam looked like Tom Mix! The cowboy actor had always been real. Sam was a fake from boots to crown. Mary had never seen a dude, even at the top of the season at Flagstaff in a getup equal to Sam's. And the funny part was that Sam was proud of himself. Mary felt sorry for Sam. He'd had a good education, and he'd been left a nice ranch. But Sam wanted to be a big rancher in the old-fashioned, rootin'-tootin' way. He'd sat in a few poker games over his head and he'd come out stripped. He'd been in love with Doreen Thorpe for years. When Doreen wanted a man to get her plans for the Tall Hat started—and Doreen couldn't do a thing without a man about to help her—she'd hired Sam.

He'd run around for her, and in his way, he'd worked like a slave. He was, on Doreen's books, foreman of the Tall Hat. He looked a Sears, Roebuck edition of Billy the Kid. Mary started to laugh. Sam colored deeply. Mary knew that his outfit had been put on to please Doreen. She wondered how Sam would look when he realized, tonight or a little later, that Doreen had fooled him just as she could fool any man. She wondered what Sam would do when he saw that the girl he loved had forgotten their childhood affection, that she had her eyes on a singer, a singer of cowboy songs, and that sooner or later she was determined to become Mrs. Bill McFee.

"Customers on the creek, Sam?" she asked lightly. "All right. I can see the sunset from my windows, I guess."

"I guess so, too," Sam grunted. "No more prowling, now! Doreen's working on that yodeler. She's got the telephone company to hook us into a broadcast line and the station at Flagstaff's going to take it and put it on national if they can arrange it. Bill McFee, singing from the Tall Hat. Something, eh?"

"Yes, Sam. Something!" she agreed.

All the way back to her room, she felt an unaccountable bitterness. Of course, Bill McFee had openly admitted, back there at the gate, that he was interested only in girls who had money, beauty and brains. But Doreen wasn't his kind of woman. Then she began to wonder. Just because the man could put his voice into a microphone and take everyone who heard him out across sage flats and piny mountains in a full moon was no proof that he was anything but just another crooner. The songs he sang had been written or dreamed up and sung by men riding a long trail, or sitting herd in distant valleys, or making solitary camps in distant places. They were lonely songs. They didn't belong in broadcasting studios or footlighted stages. Like Sam Hopper—like Doreen—Bill McFee was, she decided, a fake. All that seemed left on Old Williams Mountain of the West in which Jeb Thorpe had lived was herself, his adopted daughter, and the Tall Hat, the ranch she couldn't save.

Heat was oppressive up under the roof in spite of the night breeze beginning to lift. Mary lay there with her thoughts until she couldn't endure them. Then she rose, went down the back stairs, and out into the rear yard. From the front of the house came the music, the clink of glasses, and the quick, brittle laughter of brittle people gathered together. More cars had rolled in off the highway since nightfall and Doreen was, Mary judged, well launched on her new venture. Tonight the death of the old Thorpe ranch would be complete. Tomorrow Mary Mason would drive down to Phoenix and lease her graze to one of the big cattle companies working south of the ranch. That would be an end to it. The Tall Hat would be buried as deep as the man who had built it, and a roadhouse would prosper over the place where it lay buried.

As she came down the steps, she caught sight of two figures in a dark corner of a side veranda. One of them, the taller of the two, was with his back against the rail, pressed there by the girl in front of him. Mary heard a hoarse voice—strained as if its owner had a terrible cold—strained in swift protest.

"That little savage down at the gate made me walk all the way up here! I must have got a chill. I can't sing."

Doreen's voice came, insistent, soft, cloying.

"But I counted on it, Mr. McFee—Bill! So much. So very much! I have heard you. But always from the blank face of a radio set. Here are the trees, the moon, the stars.

Here is where you belong. I want to hear it that way!"

Bill McFee's hoarse croak sounded again, something Mary could not hear. Doreen moved even closer to him.

"Forget them. They're just guests. I brought them here to get money from them and to spread word of my place. That's all they count. But you, Bill—you and your music, your singing— Oh, Bill!"

Bill McFee's voice had a touch of desperation in it.

"But I can't sing, I tell you!"

Suddenly he bent forward. Mary saw his arms open wide in the shadows, saw Doreen's figure blend with his for a long, quivering instant. Then they parted.

"There, that's what you wanted, isn't it?" Bill McFee said, and his voice was as normal and resonant as when he had talked with Mary at the gate. For an instant neither of the figures on the porch moved. Then Doreen's white arm moved in a flashing arc. The flat of her hand made a sharp, not too severe sound against the man's cheek. She turned, then, lifted her skirt, and swept back into the house. Bill McFee remained quiet for a moment. Then he laughed softly and followed her in.

Involuntarily a witness to all this, Mary's bitterness grew. Was there nothing Doreen couldn't do? What was the ruthless, invincible touch she had which melted men in their tracks? Sam Hopper. Bill McFee. She'd get the movie producer, the orchestra leader, and the actor in the same way. It seemed cheap to Mary Mason, cheap and shoddy. And she was filled with shame that it should be all done in the name of the Tall Hat.

Slowly, she walked on down through the yard. She stopped at the corral and talked to Groundhog through the rails for a while. The moon raised over Old Williams Mountain and looked down at her, lighting the highlands behind the ranch. Climbing up, she perched on the top rail and looked out over her share of the ranch. She felt beaten. She felt as if she had betrayed a trust. Old Jeb had left it to her to hold his ranch together. But she had failed him. She wasn't equal to his daughter. She was a plain girl and she couldn't kiss a man like that—

She had been on the rail possibly a half-hour when she felt the pole bend under another weight. A tall, grinning man was swinging up beside her, a man with a soft Stetson on the back of his head.

"I've been looking for you," Bill McFee said. Mary gave him no answer. They sat together in silence on the rail for a long time. Bill's eyes followed hers up the moonlit slopes to the high country back of Old Williams Mountain. Finally he spoke.

"The Tall Hat range goes back that far?"

Suddenly she wanted to talk about the Tall Hat range—that inheritance of hers which she could not use nor work because of Doreen's selfishness and wanton misapplication of her half of the ranch. She pointed out landmarks. She described meadows and slopes. She told him where the June grass was and the August grass; where the water came and how it stayed strong throughout the year. She told him about a quarter mile of slack fence that needed overhauling. She talked for a long time and he listened with understanding.

Once he slid from the rail, gathered a few sticks, and started a little fire a couple of yards out from the rails. It made a circle of light toward which they could turn their eyes.

"Sometimes," Bill said after a while, "a man jokes when he meets a strange girl. He says things he doesn't know anything about. He makes the kind of an impression he'd give his shirt to correct."

This was an apology, an apology for his careless talk at the gate about pretty sisters and plain ones. Mary heard it. But it didn't cover the scene on the side porch of the house. She couldn't forget that. After a little, Bill McFee began to hum. The humming grew until it was a cascade of haunting notes. Astonishment filled Mary. No man with a hoarse throat could sing like that. Yet she had heard Bill swear to Doreen that he'd taken a chill after his walk up from the highway. Suddenly she understood. Bill McFee was one man Doreen couldn't beat. He had refused to sing over her elaborately arranged hook-up. And he had stuck to his refusal. Bill opened his lips and the song began. It was an old one, so old that it had a hundred verses. This was one Mary had never heard before. But she liked it. The song was "The Tale of Wild Horse Charley," and it had been Jeb Thorpe's lifelong favorite.

Tears came to Mary's eyes. A man's life, his hopes and dreams and his pleasures, grew as the song came from Bill's throat. Loneliness and comradeship. Defeat and success. Wide country and cattle herds. It was all there. Mary sat spellbound until it was finished. When she looked up, she saw that the fire Bill had made had been built bigger and that the guests of the Tall Hat were squatted around it, looking up toward the rails where she sat with Bill McFee. Doreen was there, standing a little apart, staring at her sister with a bitter, scalding hatred. And there was anger in her eyes for the man who had mocked her with a kiss and refused her the thing she had wanted of him.

Bill looked lazily at Doreen, grinned, and tipped his head toward the round, squat figure of Otto Petliz, sitting crossed-legged in front of the fire.

"Otto," he said softly, "how about lending me ten thousand dollars? I figure Miss Thorpe's investment here is about that, and I want this place."

Petliz nodded brightly. "Good. Good, Bill! Me, I am trying to think of something I can do to get her away from this place. You make it easy, Billy boy!"

"Otto, you're a bad actor," Bill grinned. "But I think it'll pass."

Doreen pushed forward, her face suddenly clear again, an eager smile pulling at her lips.

"Me?" she asked tremulously. "You want me, Mr. Petliz?"

The fat man nodded benignly. "For small parts, but, yes, my dear! Such a charming hostess. Such a

PEPSI-COLA HITS THE SPOT!
GOOD!
GOOD!
GOOD!

lovely figure. I am overwhelmed. She is an actress no, Jan, Bowen, Louisa?"

Each of them—Jan Thiebold, Tommy Bowen, and Louisa de Fries—nodded solemnly. Otto Petliz waddled to his feet and started off toward the house. The others followed him, Doreen chattering excitedly at his elbow. Bill McFee's grin widened.

"Four liars!" he said. "That's what I call friends, even if they don't know the south end of a saddle from the north! But it's no great sacrifice to Otto. He has lots of small parts to fill. And your sister *can* act, Mary Mason! She almost took me in!"

Mary climbed dizzily down from the rail. She understood that Bill had put Petliz and the rest of them up to this, that he had taken Doreen's profaning hand away from her half of the Tall Hat in the only easy and kind way that it could have been done. But the thing she couldn't quite grasp was that she now had a partner, a singing, laughing, quiet-eyed man she didn't know.

Bill climbed down beside her and started to say something. But Sam Hopper came running up, tripping over the ridiculous flaps of his chaps.

"Mary!" he howled. "I've got my chance! Mr. Petliz is taking me to the coast with him. I'm to be wardrobe man on his Western lot!"

"You'll be good, Sam," Mary said dryly, thinking of Sam's present costume.

Hopper ran on back toward the house. Bill took her arm.

"Look, I feel like a walk. And *Roamer's* still down at the gate. I've got a two-gallon can of gas there on the porch. Want to come?"

She nodded.

Two hours later, Bill screwed the cap back on the gas tank of his car, threw the empty can in back, and climbed in beside Mary. They had decided many things on the long road down. Mary could keep the rejoined halves of the Tall Hat going through Bill's circuit season. Bill could confine his contracts to three months on the road. The rest of the year would belong to the ranch. And though no word had been said, something else was understood. But neither acknowledged it until Bill tentatively put his foot on the starter button which had refused to work for him that morning.

It whirred stoutly, now. The car's engine caught without a falter. Bill dropped *Roamer* into gear, pulling out of the dip and through the gate. Then he reached down and shut off the motor. His smile was warm and wide as the moon.

"*Roamer* says it's all right, now," he chuckled. "I've got the right girl. He says I can kiss you, now, beautiful—"

Mary felt Bill's arms around her. She felt the warm, gentle hunger in his lips. She heard the soft tenderness in his voice as he whispered in her ear. But these things would belong to her always. Right now she had a new knowledge to which she clung with prideful joy.

She had thought she could never kiss a man like Doreen could. But now—

THE END.

GHOST OF SNICKER'S NOB

by Muriel Ives

" 'Tain't no such thing as ghosts!" snorted Sheriff Minnie, and saddled up to scare the livin' daylights outta one.

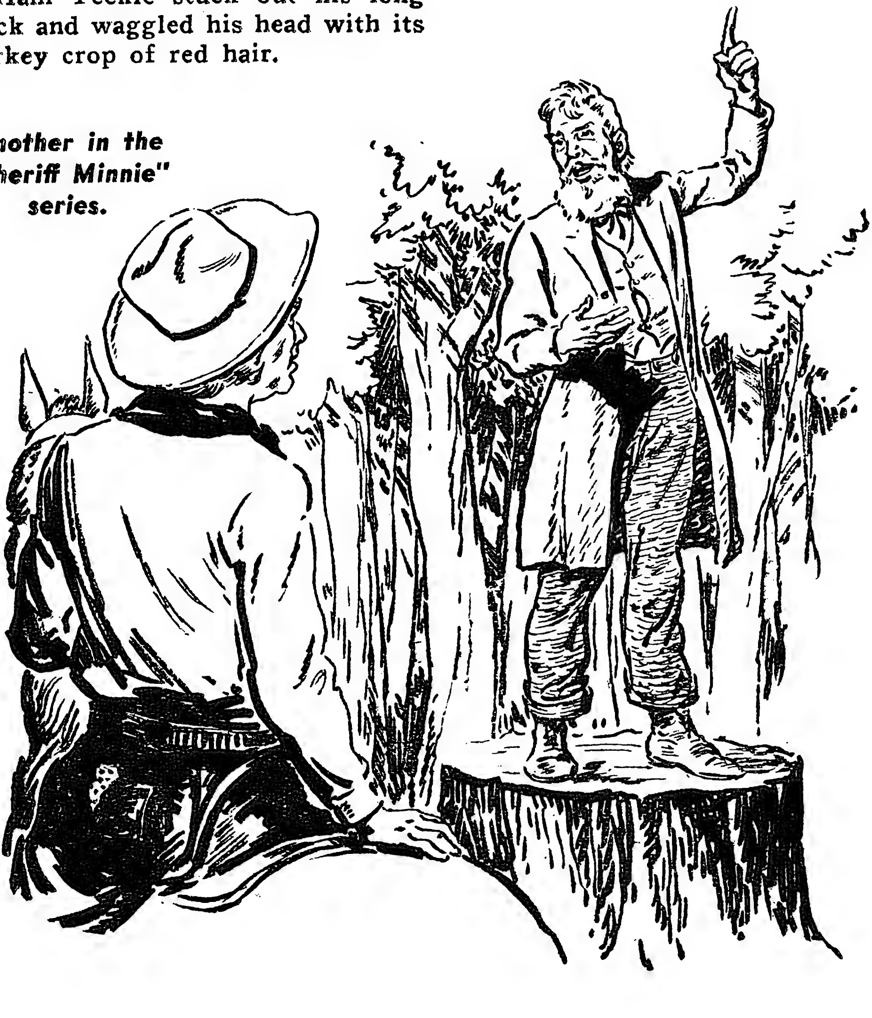
Minnie swung around from her desk and slammed her boots on the floor.

" 'Tain't no such thing!" she snapped. "Ain't no such a thing as ghosts an' you know it as well's I do!"

Ham Teckle stuck out his long neck and waggled his head with its turkey crop of red hair.

"I ain't sayin' nothin'," he told Minnie, "as to what is and what ain't. I'm jest tellin' ya what I saw. Last night there was a light in that little old cabin up on Snicker's Nob—the cabin Paradise lived in with that pretty gal daughter of hisn,

Another in the "Sheriff Minnie" series.



until she died and Paradise said he couldn't stand it no more without her."

"Mm-m-m," said Minnie. She chewed her lip in silence.

Ham asked, "Ever see the grave he buried her in? He kep' it covered all the time with evergreen boughs."

"Yeah," said Minnie, "I've seen it. I went up there when she died."

Ham leaned back in his chair. He stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his buckskin vest. "Ever strike you," he went on, "that there was anything funny about the way that gal died?"

Minnie didn't look at him. She poked a hole in her blotter with her yellow pen handle.

"If I'd thought there was anything funny about Lacy's death," she said, "I'd have arrested somebody for it. I'm the law," she informed Ham, "an' that's what the law does."

"Oh," answered Ham, "yeah. Oh, sure. I didn't mean nothin'."

"Tell me," said Minnie, "just what you saw last night."

"Waal," Ham began, "I was ridin' home and, like I said, I seen this light, so thinkin' maybe Paradise had come back or somethin', I rid up to say 'hello.' An' it was then I seen . . . I seen—"

"Well," snapped Minnie, "what was it you seen?"

"I seen Lacy," said Ham. His breath went, thinking about it. "She was standin' in the doorway and she was kinda swayin' back an' forth and singin', low and croonin', an' . . . an' you could see the light shinin' right through her!" Ham's face took on a green tinge and his eyes bugged wide. "I let out a yell—I couldn't help it. An' . . . an' the minute I yelled, the most awful noise busted out. A noise like all the demons o' hell was yowlin', and when I looked again, Lacy'd gone and there wa'n't no light nor nothin'."

Minnie said nothing for a minute. She just sat there gulping a little. Then she stuck her chin out.

"Shucks," she declared. "You musta been down to Tug's and drunk too much of his rotten likker. You was just seein' things."

"No, I wasn't," persisted Ham. "An' if you don't believe me you ride out past Snicker Nob tonight and see what you see!"

"Sure I will," said Minnie. "Sure."

She talked about it to Peter that night while they ate supper. She told him what Ham had seen.

"An' you know as well as I do," she ended, "they ain't no such a thing as ghosts."

"If there were," said Peter, "that girl Lacy would certainly come back to haunt that old reprobate father of hers. Paradise, indeed! What a name for that scoundrel!"

"He was a good preacher," Minnie remarked. "Did you ever hear him?"

"Certainly I've heard him. Exhorting the multitude to lay aside their sins and enter paradise."

"Yeah," said Minnie, "that's where he got his name." She thought a minute, and then added, "Paradise ain't no scoundrel, Peter. He's a good man."

Peter looked at her with his honest, clear-thinking eyes. He reminded her, "You said that when Lacy died, remember? But there were a lot of us who didn't agree with you. There were a lot of us who thought there was something very queer about the way that child died."

Minnie told him, "Ham used them very same words this afternoon."

"Well," said Peter, "it's the truth. You should have ordered that grave opened, Minnie. I told you at the time—"

"And you was wrong! I said then and I say now Paradise is a good man, an' if he said she died of pneumonia, then she died of pneumonia. An' if he said he buried her hisself because there was snowdrifts so high neither man nor hoss could get through 'em, then that's the truth. Dang hang it! He was crazy about that girl, Peter. He'd as soon have cut off his right arm as have anything happen to her. He worshiped her."

"So he said," muttered Peter. "The old scoundrel!"

"Huh!" Minnie snorted. "He ain't."

She did the supper dishes in jig time and went down to the livery stable to get her horse. Pee-wee Hoke was playing checkers with one of the Yancy boys. The board was balanced on a box and the lantern swung on a nail above their heads.

"Snatch me bald!" said Pee-wee when he saw Minnie. His eyes got black because his face got white. "You ain't really goin' out there, be ya?"

"Out where?" asked Minnie. "Just get my horse, will ya? I didn't come here to talk."

Pee-wee got the horse and Minnie pulled her saddle down from its peg.

The Yancy boy said, "D-do you w-want me to go with you, Minnie?"

"Not with them chattering teeth," answered Minnie. "And how do you know where I'm going?"

"Ham Teckle was by here an hour ago," said the boy. "He told us. He said you were going to ride out, and he said he wouldn't go past the Nob again for a million dollars."

"Ham's scared of his shadow," Minnie muttered. "Besides that I ain't too sure he wasn't full of bad likker." She rode off without looking back.

As she got near the road leading to Snicker's Nob, she pulled her horse to a walk. It was a narrow road, twisting and climbing up, sheer. Pine trees marched black beside it and great lumps of boulder looked like crouching beasts. Minnie rode on. As she came to the last turn before the cabin would come into view, she began to whistle softly between her teeth. Then she rounded the turn.

She pulled in her horse and sat still. Everything, down to the last detail, was exactly as Ham had said. Light flowed in a kind of bright glory from the cabin. The door was open and in the doorway stood Lacy, dressed as everyone remembered her —old Levis gone a little ragged and her legs bare and that cloud of gold hair that, brushed to shining, made her look like an angel.

And she was singing, just as Ham had said. Singing and swaying a little. A soft croon of sound that you had to listen for. Minnie listened and she recognized it—"Rock Of Ages." Old Paradise's favorite hymn. He'd told how he'd sung it himself at Lacy's funeral, that service he'd fixed up all by himself while the snow was too deep for anybody else to get through.

"Mm-m-m," said Minnie, and jabbed a heel into her buckskin's side to make him go forward.

He never went. Before he could budge, a piercing yell split the silence. Lacy vanished. The light went out and the yowl Ham had described tore out, wave on wave, over the quiet landscape.

"You blam, smithering, no-'count, bow-legged donkey!" yelled Minnie. "What d'you want to do that for?"

"I . . . I'm s-sorry," said the Yancy boy, "b-but I f-followed you up here. I w-wanted to s-see—"

"Well," snapped Minnie, "I hope you're satisfied!" and she rode on up toward the cabin.

Fifty feet off, she dropped from the saddle and went forward on foot. She loosened the gun near her right hand and, in her left, she gripped a flashlight. At the closed door she listened. No sound. She pushed it open a little. Still no sound. She shoved it open all the way and went in.

"Lacy!" she called softly. "Lacy!"

There was no sound. No breath, no movement of clothing, no soft footstep. Minnie stood, her head up, listening. Suddenly she flashed her light, the big round light moving over walls, floor, ceiling. There was nothing. Empty windows, no furniture, the dark hole of a fireplace. Minnie crossed over and tried the back door. It was locked.

"Humph!" she said, and went back to her horse.

"D-did you s-see anything?" asked the Yancy boy.

"Sure," said Minnie. "A mess o' spooks made faces at me and a big tall thing with waving arms blew an icy breath down my neck."

"Gee!" breathed the Yancy boy. Minnie rode the rest of the way home in silence.

It was early the next morning that Squat Hogan came in with his yarn about the pay roll being stolen out at the Bright Star copper mine—stolen and then brought back.

"Brought back!" said Minnie. "What kind of a thief's that?"

"I dunno," answered Squat. "But that's what happened. It was last week. We didn't send for you on account of how it didn't strike us a thief like that was thief enough to hunt for."

"Humph!" said Minnie.

It was noon when, on the road to the junction, she met Steve Wiles. Steve was foreman out at the Bar Q, and he had a story to tell.

"It was nearly two weeks ago," he said, "and one morning we woke up to find half the herd we was pasturing down in the valley missing."

"Missing!" exclaimed Minnie. "Say"—her eyes slitted—"what is this? You tryin' to—"

"Ain't tryin' nothin', Minnie," said Steve. "Just givin' you facts. Half that herd was gone, but we found 'em all safe and sound some twenty miles up the creek next day."

"So they wasn't stolen at all," Minnie put in.

"Sure they were," said Steve. "Where they were found wasn't our land and they'd had to get themselves through our wire fence to get there. And if a cow can cut a fence the way that fence was cut, he oughta be in a rodeo."

"Humph!" snorted Minnie. She scowled at him. He shifted in his saddle.

"Maybe," he told her, "we should have reported it to you, Minnie. But when we found the cows so quick it didn't hardly seem necessary."

"Maybe it wasn't," said Minnie. "An' then again maybe it was. It all depends."

She rode on and so did Steve. It was on her way back that she ran into Judge Adams. He doffed his hat and bowed low. It made his long silver hair fall forward a little. His eyes twinkled under their shaggy brows.

"Greetings!" he said, "and salutations. This meeting, dear lady, saves me the trouble of writing a letter. A letter of warning."

"Warning?" asked Minnie.

The judge smiled. "My loss," he told her, "is your gain. Have you ever heard of a man named Paradise?"

"Humph!" said Minnie. "Sure, I've heard of him. He lived in my county for years."

"Exactly," returned the judge. "And, of late, he has been in mine. But I heard some two or three weeks ago that he had left us and was returning to you. So I am warning you."

"About old Paradise?" said Minnie. "He's all right. He— Say, have you ever heard him preach?"

"Certainly," answered the judge. "I made it my business to hear him preach. He has a voice of gold and a tongue of silver, but the man is a scoundrel."

"Oh, no, he ain't," returned Minnie. "He's all right."

"Very well," said the judge. "But, remember, I warned you. Among other things the man is an inveterate thief. Nothing is safe when he's around."

"Oh," inquired Minnie, "it ain't? Then why didn't you get him in that fancy jail you got over in your county?"

The judge frowned. He shook his silver head and put his hat back on. "We couldn't," he said. "The old trickster was always just a mite too smart for us."

"Or else he hadn't done none of the things you tried to pin on him," returned Minnie. "A suspicious nature, if you ask me," she snapped, "is a terrible thing."

The judge looked hurt and rode on. Minnie looked thoughtful and rode home.

She waited until dark, then she rode out again. She left town going down past the church and out Boothill Road. She jogged along happily until she was sure the emptiness of the way she'd come wasn't fooling her. Then she circled, riding cross-country clear around the town, until she was galloping fast on the road leading to Snicker's Nob.

This time she took no chances. She dropped from the saddle a good quarter of a mile from the spot she'd seen Lacy the night before, and she went forward on foot, cautiously, deftly, so that no twig cracked and no stone rolled.

She got to the clearing, and there was Lacy, swaying in the doorway, singing softly, with that soft glory of light bathing her. Minnie kept on going. She got up close to her, so close that she could see the shine of light on the tendrils of gold hair blowing in the breeze.

Then she said softly, "Lacy, this is Sheriff Minnie. Ain't no sense your running away again. This time I'm alone and I'll foller you."

Lacy stopped singing. The light in the cabin went out. The howling began.

Minnie leaped forward and grabbed. The doorway was empty. She plunged through. The door was closed and she banged her head.

"You little blitherin', blisterin' varmint! I'll get you!" She whanged the door open, flipped on her flashlight, and stopped.

A man stood in the middle of the room—a young man with a firm jaw, steady gray eyes and a blazing shock of red hair. He had a gun in his hand.

"Humph!" said Minnie. "What're you gonna do with that thing?"

"Hold you here," answered the man, "for about five minutes."

Minnie thought about that, her eyes squinting. Then, before the man could move, she'd dived, grabbed his gun and cradled it deep in her own palm.

"Y' oughta have more sense," she told him, "than to try a thing like that on me. Now"—she settled herself on her heels—"what's this foolishness Lacy's up to?"

The man said nothing.

Minnie snapped, "Huh, won't talk. Well, then, I'll go find Lacy." She turned to the door.

"Don't!" cried the man. "Don't hunt for her."

Minnie turned back. Her eyes were slits again. "You sound," she said, "as if my finding her would be some kind of tragedy."

"It would," answered the man. "Please don't."

Minnie came back. She still held the gun level, but her eyes met his fairly.

"S'pose," she suggested, "you and I get together? Let me talk first. I'm fond of Lacy, always have been. She was a good kid when she was little, she was a good kid when she got big. And she was good-lookin'."

"She was beautiful," said the young man. "She's the most beautiful girl in Hollywood."

"Hollywood!" exclaimed Minnie. "Was that where she went?"

The young man looked as if he'd like to bite out his tongue.

"I'd promised her I wouldn't tell anyone," he said. "But—"

"Look," broke in Minnie, "I'm the sheriff. And I didn't get to be sheriff, nor get to stay sheriff, by bein' a fool. I know Lacy ain't dead. I've known it ever since I come up and dug her grave out one night during all the fuss."

"You dug up her grave?"

"Sure I did," said Minnie. "You don't suppose I was going to all the trouble of making up a case of murder or something against old Paradise unless I had to? And half the county thought he'd killed her in some kind of a religious rage or somethin', maybe because she wouldn't sing hymns the way he wanted her to. They said he was crazy, an' a crazy man's apt to do anything. But I know he wasn't. Paradise is a good man, accordin' to his lights. He—"

"Good man!" The young man yelled the words, his face as red as his hair and his eyes shooting flame. "A good man! That devil! Do you know why he told everybody Lacy'd died? Do you know why he heaped up that grave out there and kept it so touchingly decorated with evergreen boughs?"

"No," answered Minnie, "I wish I did. That's somethin' I've been tryin' to figure out for years."

"Well," said the man, "Ill tell you. He said it was because Lacy wanted to go on the stage, or the movies—she didnt care which it was as long as she could act. He said no daughter of his could do a thing like that, so when she ran away he went through all that burial performance. It was his way of disowning her. That was what he said. She found out the real reason last week."

"Humph!" snorted Minnie. "So far it all makes sense. I said he was a good man, according to his lights. His lights ain't our lights, but he lives his life by 'em. He—"

"A good man—good to disown his daughter?"

"She ran away," said Minnie. "She went on the stage. It was a sin to him, an' he dealt with it accordin'. I don't believe—"

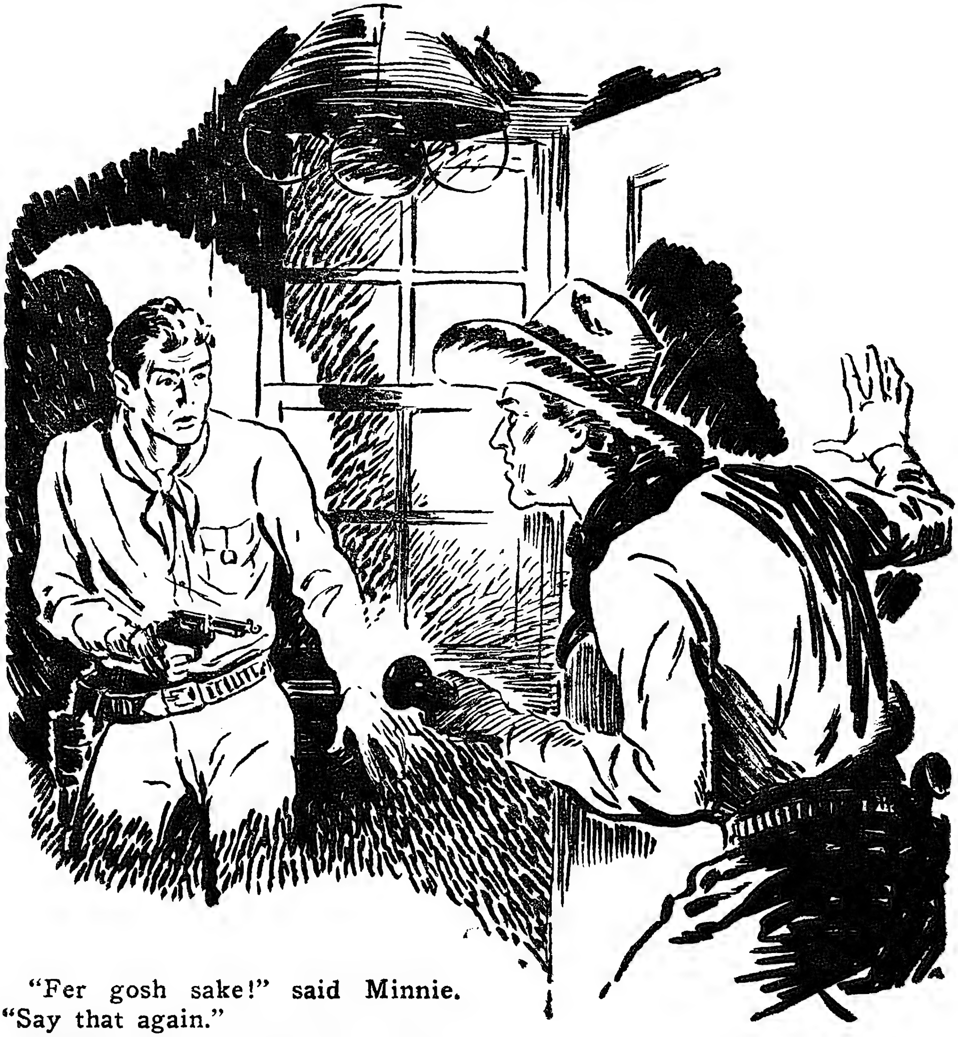
"But, Minnie, that wasn't the real reason he buried me!" A new voice, light, lilting and lovely. Lacy stood in the doorway. An exquisite, delicately beautiful Lacy whom Minnie had never seen before. A Lacy whose eyes were deep and bluer than the bluest sea, a Lacy whose hair was such a halo of loveliness around the pure line of her ivory-pale cheek that Minnie, remembering the little berry-brown girl she'd been, gasped and sat down.

"Lacy!" she exclaimed.

"You've got to understand," pleaded Lacy. "It's an awful thing he's done, my father, and . . . and if I can make him realize how awful by haunting him—"

"Oh," said Minnie, "so that's what you're doin'—all this is in the hope of bringin' your papa to his senses. Well, it might work at that."

"Might!" breathed Lacy. "Minnie, it's got to work. My . . . my mother's life depends on it!"



She whanged the door open, flipped on her flashlight, and stopped. A young man with red hair and steady gray eyes stood there, a gun in his hand.

"Fer gosh sake!" said Minnie. "Say that again."

"Mother," repeated Lacy. "She . . . she's in a hospital. I only found her last week, and . . . and they think she's dying. But, oh, Minnie, I wish you could see her. She's so thin and . . . and it's terrible. All she talks about is her fear of punishment. She . . . she babbles about it, Minnie. I think part of the time she's delirious. But she says my father laid a curse on her and . . . and she's terrified."

"I thought," said Minnie, "that your ma was dead. Your pa sure brought you up as if you had no mother."

"I know," answered Lacy. "I thought so, too, till last week. Then I got a letter. She'd seen me in some movies they had at the hospital, and she recognized the name and . . . and me. I look so much the way she did at my age. So I went out to see her, and that's all."

"No," said Minnie, "'tain't all. Not by a mile o' frog jumps. First off, what did your ma do that your pa had to cuss her out like that? An', second—"

"She ran away," explained Lacy, "just as I did, and she took me with her. But father came after her and . . . and took me away from her. That was when he laid a curse on her."

"Humph," said Minnie. She turned that over in her mind. Then she continued, "As I was sayin', second, what do you think you're gonna gain by this crazy ha'nt you're stagin' up here?"

Lacy came forward. Her lovely face was grave with earnestness.

"I know my father," she answered. "He believes that spirits come back to visit those who've done them wrong, and when he hears I appear here—"

"But you ain't dead," objected Minnie. "And he knows it."

"Oh, yes, she is," said the red-headed young man. "She's dead all right. If you don't believe it, read this." He held out a newspaper clipping. It was a three-column obituary with a very good picture of Lacy heading it, and the details of her death.

"He buried me once," explained Lacy, "to please himself. Now I'm dying to save mother."

"My gosh!" ejaculated Minnie. Then her eyes squinted. "But I still don't see—"

"Look," said the red-headed man, "we sent him one of these clippings, see? And now Lacy's haunting his cabin. Sooner or later, either he'll come to us or we'll go to him, and then she'll tell him the only thing that'll stop her haunting is for him to go and make his peace with her mother. Simple, isn't it?"

"If that's simple," Minnie returned, "I'd hate to see you two when you really got going." She eyed the young man. "Just where do you fit into this thing, anyhow?" she demanded.

He grinned. "Lacy told me if I thought of a scheme to help her mother she'd marry me. So I did this. I got the clipping printed and everything!"

"Mm-m-m," said Minnie. "I don't suppose it ever struck you to do anything so simple as write Paradise a letter and ask him to go see his wife, now, did it?"

"He'd never have gone!" declared Lacy furiously. "You don't know him. He'd have wanted her to suffer like this! He thought everybody in the worl'd should suffer who didn't walk the old straight and narrow path he talked so much about. Oh, you don't know! You never lived with him. But it was terrible. I couldn't stand it. My mother couldn't. He wouldn't let you sing any songs but hymns. You couldn't read any books but the Bible and 'Pilgrim's Progress.' You couldn't talk. You couldn't smile. It . . . it— I can't tell you how awful it was!"

"Mm-m-m," said Minnie. And after a while she rode back down Snicker's Nob. It was midnight when she got home and Peter's eyes asked questions. "I been out findin' me a spook," Minnie told him, and let it go at that.

Next morning, she started out on a hunt for old Paradise. It took her a day and a half to find him. Everybody she talked to had heard tell he was somewhere in the neighborhood, but nobody knew where he was right then. Finally, down near Scrub's Hollow, she heard his voice. Loud, ringing, golden, he was exhorting someone, somewhere, to follow the ways of righteousness.

"Drop your evil ways," he was telling them. "Drop them before the sun has touched the horizon to end another day, and at that moment you will enter the gates of paradise."

Minnie rode over, following the voice. She shoved her way through a ring of pines and came to a clearing. Paradise was there, but he was exhorting no one. He was alone.

"Hello," said Minnie. "Practicing?" Paradise looked down at her from the stump on which he was standing. The sun came needling down through the trees, making his eyes deep blue, his beard stainless white, and his cheeks healthily pink. He smiled at Minnie.

"How do you do?" he greeted her. "This gives me great pleasure, Sheriff Minnie. It is some years since we met."

"Yeah," said Minnie. "The night you caught me opening that fool grave you made for Lacy was the last time." She grinned at him cheerfully. "I notice you've kept out o' my county ever since."

"Er—" fumbled Paradise. "Ah—I mean I wish to make it clear that fear of your ministrations of the law had nothing to do with my absence. I am afraid of no man and my record is clear with God."

"Is it?" said Minnie. "How about your wife and the way you cussed her out? The God I know don't approve of a man's layin' a cuss on his own wife."

The effect of this on old Paradise was alarming. He jerked erect. His face went white and his eyes, in all that whiteness, looked red. He leaped down from his stump and strode over to Minnie. He grabbed the bridle of her horse and shook it.

"Don't mention my wife!" he yelled. "She's dead and gone—"

"No, she ain't, neither," said Minnie. "She's as alive as I am and she's scared about that cussin' you slammed at her years ago. Why don't you go an' take it offn her?"

"Mind your business," Paradise shouted. "If she's still alive and if she's scared of me, I'm glad. She deserves to be scared. I told her where she'd go when she died and she'll certainly go there. My mind's not changed."

"Mm-m-m," said Minnie. "You're tougher'n I thought you were."

"Not tough," answered Paradise. "I am just. The wicked shall reap as they sow."

"Suppose," asked Minnie, "you knew your wife was dyin', and she was terrified crazy over the things you'd told her? Wouldn't you go down then an' help her?"

"Certainly not!" said Paradise. "Those who walk in the ways of iniquity shall perish thereby and receive their just punishment. And those who walk in the ways of righteousness shall enter free the gates of paradise."

"Huh!" snorted Minnie. She watched him, her eyes slitted. Finally she asked, "Heard anything about Lacy lately?"

"No," said old Paradise quickly. "No." But his face had gone white again.

Minnie rode home slowly. She spoke three times during the trip. First she said, "Dang hang it! Looks like Lacy knew her pa better'n I did." Next she said, "That poor woman, dyin' way off there and scared to go because of the cuss he laid on her." And, finally, "I gotta do somethin'. If Lacy plays ghost an' he discovers he's bein' deceived—" She let it go there, but the thought set a scowl between her eyes.

She got back to find Steve Wiles with his feet upon her desk, smoking his pipe in her office.

"Get your feet down," said Minnie, "and put out that evil-smellin' weed. Why Heaven ever saw fit to make men—"

"It couldn't," answered Steve, "get enough women like you."

"Humph!" said Minnie. But she

added, "All right, smoke your pipe if you want to. What d'ya want?"

"Well," Steve told her, "you got mad when I didn't tell you the minute our cows were stolen before, even though we found them safe. So you might like to know that it's our pay roll that's gone now. Though, maybe," he added, "this time tomorrow it'll be brought back."

"Squat was up at the copper mine," said Minnie, then her eyes slitted. "The judge warned me he was a thief," she muttered. "But I sure wouldn't o' thunk it."

"Who's a thief?" asked Steve.

"My red-headed grandfather," snapped Minnie. "Now go along and let me think." But before Steve had gotten to the door she called him back. "I'll tell you who it is," she said, "and you can get yourself a posse and go out huntin' for him if you've a mind to. It's Paradise that's takin' them things. Now g'wan with you."

"You mean," asked Steve, "you're not coming with us?"

"I gotta think," said Minnie.

But, after Steve had gone, she spent no time in thinking. She tossed some supper together for Peter, then headed her horse out along the road that led to Snicker's Nob.

Before she got in sight of the light that she knew was there she realized something was wrong. There was no familiar croon of Lacy's singing. Instead, there was the sound of voices.

As she got to the last turn she recognized the ringing, rolling organ tones of old Paradise. As she rounded the turn she heard Lacy's scream.

Minnie polished off the trail at a gallop. She didn't stop until she got right up to the cabin steps. She dropped from her saddle with her guns drawn.

"Let go that girl!" she yelled. "Paradise, you old fool, get your hands off her throat!"

Paradise looked up. His eyes had that red light they'd had before.

"I'll shoot," warned Minnie. "Drop her!"

Paradise dropped her slowly. Lacy lay, for an instant, like a frail, crushed flower. Then she opened her eyes.

"Alan," she said. "Go see Alan. He's in there." Her eyes moved through the cabin door. But, as she spoke, the red-headed man appeared. He was a mess. His nose was bleeding, his lips were cut and he was feeling his jaw carefully.

The minute he saw Paradise he jumped for him.

"Quit it," ordered Minnie. "I got him under my two guns—that's enough. I thought," she said to Paradise, "that I'd get you arrested in time to save you from doing anything like this."

"Arrested?" asked Paradise.

"Arrested!" exclaimed Lacy and Alan together.

"Sure," said Minnie, "for stealin' the Bar Q pay roll. But—"

"Ah"—a beautiful light flamed in old Paradise's eyes—"then you knew it was I! You knew!" He sighed blissfully. "I have tried so hard to get arrested!" he said.

"You've tried—" gasped Minnie.

"Certainly I have tried," said Paradise. "But it is a very difficult thing for a man like me to break the law. Yet"—he raised his eyes so that he looked like a sanctimonious saint—"it was the only way," he murmured. "The only way."

Minnie didn't move her guns, but her voice became gentle. "G'wan," she said. "Tell us."

Paradise smiled. His face held the light of the ancient prophets.

"I had done wrong," he told her simply. "Although"—his eyes touched Minnie's—"I did not see fit to confess my sins to you yesterday since, to a man of God, there is no confessor save God himself. Still, my conscience told me that I had sinned—against my daughter and against my wife. And how could I make recompense? I did not know where they were. There was nothing I could do. So I set about to contrive to get myself in jail. Judge Adams, over in the next county, gave me the idea," he ended modestly.

"Yeah," said Minnie. "He told me you were a thief."

Paradise looked grieved. "I was no thief," he told her, "when I lived in the judge's jurisdiction. But under his continual accusation, I acquired the idea. I must be punished for my sins, and robbery would be a most excellent means to suit my ends."

"Great wigglin' tadpoles!" exclaimed Minnie. "Then you was the one who kept stealin' things and puttin' 'em back."

"Certainly," said Paradise. "I have already explained how difficult it was for a man of my calling to break the law. So, while I could force myself to take things, I could not force my conscience to allow me to keep them. If"—he smiled at Minnie—"if you had not caught me tonight, I very much fear I should have had to return this money by morning. But now"—he glowed triumphantly—"you may arrest me for the theft and return it yourself!"

"Well, I'll be a writhin', tossin' offspring of a rattler!" ejaculated Minnie. She looked at Lacy and Alan. They were open-mouthed, stunned to silence. Minnie said very quietly, "I beg your pardon, Paradise, if I'm askin' too personal questions. But why, if you was so anxious to make peace with your wife an' daughter, didn't you make peace with 'em like I said to, instead of half killin' Lacy like you did just now?"

"Half killing Lacy?" He turned to his daughter and stared as if he'd never seen her before. "You mean"—he turned back to Minnie—"you mean she is not dead? You mean I was not wrestling with an evil spirit chained to this mortal world by her sins?"

"No," said Lacy, "you weren't."

"Oh, my gosh!" muttered Alan.

Minnie said very gently, "Lacy hoped she could get you to go see your wife. She hoped, if you thought she was a voice from the grave, that you'd kinda do what she wanted. She figured—"

"She figured wrong," cut in Paradise. "I am an old man and I have walked the ways of God all my life, and I know that no soul remains earthbound save by its chain of sin. Therefore, no wish of theirs should be followed since it must be an evil thing. But"—the light came back into his face—"if you are really my flesh-and-blood, living daughter—"

"I am," Lacy told him.

"Then," said old Paradise, "come to my arms, and together we will go to your mother and beg her forgiveness for all our delinquencies."

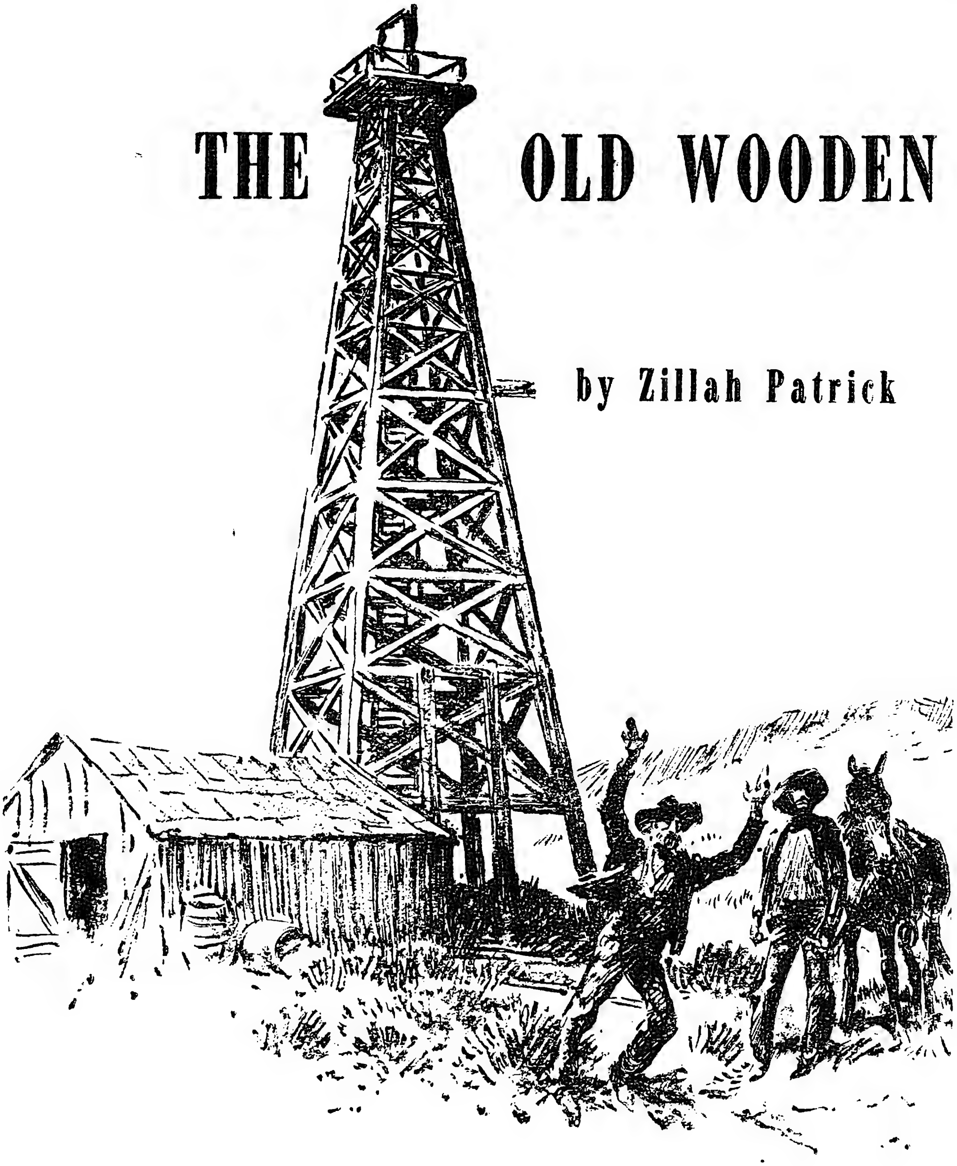
"And I wisht," said Minnie, two hours later, to Peter, "I sure wisht you coulda seen 'em. Lacy an' old Paradise huggin' each other fit to kill, an' that red-headed boy beamin' like a forest fire on account o' how now this's turned out all right, him an' Lacy'll get married. I told you," she ended triumphantly, "that Paradise was a good man, accordin' to his lights."

"Mm-m-m," answered Peter, "one of these days you're going to be wrong, and then won't you be surprised!"

"Won't I!" said Minnie, and she offered him her best grin.

THE END.

THE OLD WOODEN



by Zillah Patrick

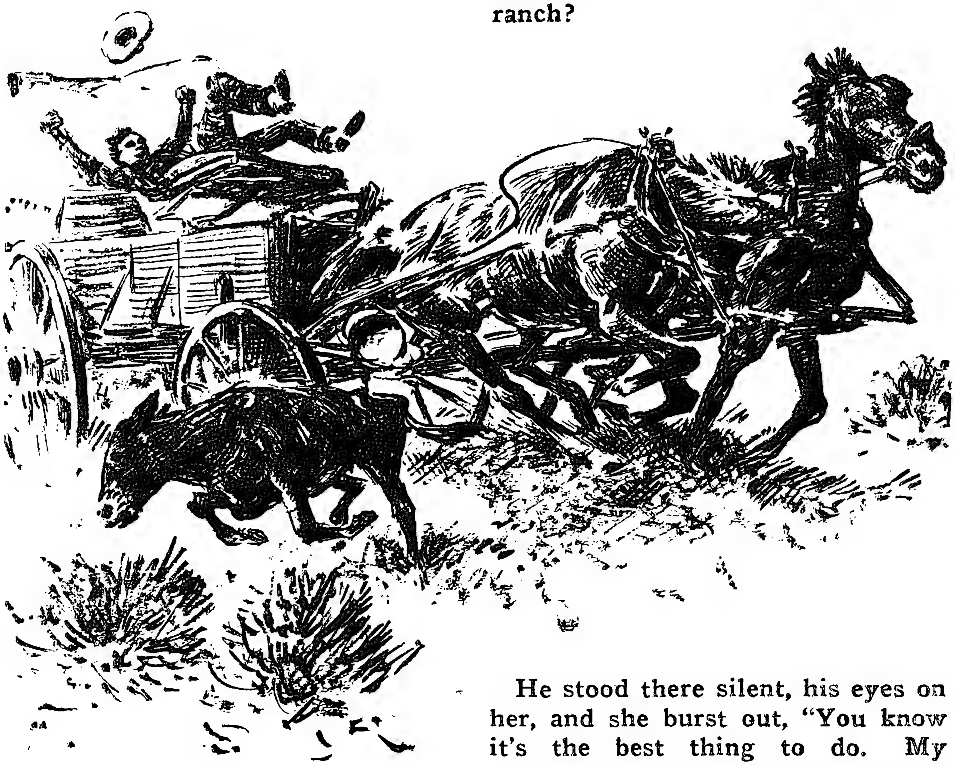
Much as the news meant to him, to the ranch, to all of them, Ty still hadn't said one single word.

Nancy had reminded herself, rushing out to the bunkhouse to meet him, that her tall young foreman took everything calmly, but this was a queer kind of calm. Head bent, wide hat brim shadowing his face, he stood beside his horse like a man suddenly turned to stone. There was no reason why he shouldn't be happy about it, thought Nancy miserably, and in the stillness the rumble of oil trucks down on the highway came mockingly across her own barren acres.

"Aren't you going to wish me happiness?" she asked at last. "I could hardly wait for you to get home. I thought you'd be so surprised and glad."

DERRICK

—gaunt and weatherbeaten, was the only monument to a man who founded his whole life on the thought: "A man is no better than his word."



Ty raised stricken eyes. "It's a surprise, all right," he said, tight-lipped. "A man like Gravette—"

"Julian's nice when you know him," said Nancy. "And he's going to build up the ranch so we can pay off the debts—" She glanced at the shabby, weather-beaten buildings around her and sighed. "It seems too wonderful to believe."

Ty was studying the toe of his boot. "You wouldn't be doing this just to keep the Bar K?" he asked dully.

"No . . . no, of course not," she said hurriedly. "I'm very fond of Julian, and he's so in love with—"

Ty's keen gray eyes flicked up and she broke off, confused, annoyed with herself. Would her silly heart ever learn not to leap when he looked at her unexpectedly? Didn't she know that, to him, she was only a part of the ranch?

He stood there silent, his eyes on her, and she burst out, "You know it's the best thing to do. My money's all gone into that old oil well—sand well, rather—and I can't borrow any more. Even you've put your last cent into it—everything you have."

Ty ran his hand along the neck of the big buckskin who was nuzzling and nibbling at him, and his lips relaxed a little. "That's not worrying me. I've still got Buck."

"Well, we're broke. And I won't give up my home. I promised dad. And those awful debts—" She beat her hands together softly.

"Wouldn't Allison help you?"

"Uncle Tom's getting old. I won't ask him to risk his money. Besides, dad taught me to carry my own load."

"He wouldn't want you to marry a man like Gravette."

"Oh, Ty! Julian's all right, and he's so interested in the ranch. Why would he want to help me if he weren't good?" She came closer, her voice coaxing. "We'll all be so happy. You'll stay on as foreman, of course, and everything will be just the same."

Turning abruptly, Ty began unstrapping his bedroll. "You'll have to find another foreman, Nancy. Afraid I couldn't take Gravette's orders."

"You will stay!" she cried at his broad back. "You know I couldn't get along without you. Why, we've grown up together."

He whirled on her, eyes blazing in his white face. "I suppose you think I'll hang around here seeing you married to another man! Good old Ty—somebody throw him a bone. No, thanks!"

Barely above a whisper, Nancy said, "What do you mean?"

"I suppose you don't know that I've been crazy about you ever since I came here, that I've stayed on, knowing I didn't have a chance, just hoping— Oh, what's the use!" he finished bitterly. "Go on and be happy, Nancy. I'm clearing out the end of the month." He jerked his hat over his eyes and yanked at the reins. "Come on, Buck."

A strangled sob broke from Nancy. She ran after him, seized his arm and stood in front of him.

"You mustn't be angry with me. You can't leave. It wouldn't be home without you."

Blinking back tears, trying to smile, she gazed up into his averted face. His eyes came up slowly, unwillingly, to meet hers, then his chest rose in a long breath and he caught her in his arms. The touch of his lips made her forget everything and everybody else in the whole world, and she clung to him, her heart beating wildly.

His lips left hers, his cheek rested for an instant on her hair, then he thrust her gently from him and strode away. Tears blinded her, and she pressed a hand to her quivering mouth, felt the cold reminder of the ring that circled her finger. Julian—Julian's ring. And she had been in another man's arms, kissing him.

With a moan, she spun around and ran to the house, up the back steps, into the kitchen. "I don't want any supper, Sarah," she said to the old housekeeper.

In her room, she sank down on the window seat, trying to think calmly, sensibly. She loved Julian. Of course she did. Ty was merely a friend, a dear companion, her girlhood hero; and they'd only been caught off guard, tricked by the thought of separation. Furthermore, if he really loved her, why, oh, why hadn't he said something before it was too late?

But she knew why he hadn't and she knew it could have made no difference if he had. He was with her in the next room that awful night the man they both loved took final leave of his home. Clearly now, as when he spoke them, Nancy heard her father's last words:

"Promise me you'll keep the ranch, Nancy."

And there was only one way to keep it.

At the time of her father's death, the place was already mortgaged.

Year after year, droughts and hailstorms had parched their crops or beaten them into the grounds. Because Clyde Patton, a neighbor and former Bar K hand discharged for petty stealing, had given trouble about water rights, their cattle starved or were sacrificed on the market. Yet, all over the county black gold was flowing, and her father borrowed, borrowed again, drilling for oil. The old wooden derrick still reared up from the deserted field adjoining Patton's farm, and Nancy, wearily undressing, wished she might never see it again.

Long hours she lay awake, tossing from side to side of the old four-poster. Tomorrow, she must drive to town and see if her trousseau had come. She was glad, now, that Julian had persuaded her into marrying him the following week. His devotion, the blessed, settled security would make her forget all this. But, out there in the bunkhouse, was Ty awake, staring up at the dark ceiling, too?

Weighted with sleeplessness and fatigue, she walked into the Stockman's Bank early the next morning and, smiling at the grizzled cashier, slid a check under the wicket. He hesitated, shot a glance at her and disappeared behind the cage to return, peering apologetically over his spectacles.

"I'm sorry, Miss Nancy," he said with a dry cough, "but you don't have that much here."

She felt the blood leave her face. "How much do I have?"

"Just a dollar and eight cents. Something important, was it?" he inquired in a kindly tone.

Several persons were waiting nearby, and the thought that they had overheard everything increased Nancy's humiliation. "No . . . no, nothing. Thank you," she managed, and hurried out.

How had she ever been so careless, so stupid? The trousseau would have to be returned, the wedding postponed, and what excuse could she make to Julian? Dazedly, she moved along the walk by the dust-reddened buildings, then the familiar tilt of a big hat loomed over a group ahead of her and her pulses leaped. As if he felt her gaze, Ty turned, saw her and came quickly to meet her.

"I've got something to tell you," murmured Nancy, falling into step with him, and when they were around a quiet corner, stopped, flung out her hands. "Ty, I'm simply ruined. I . . . I ordered my trousseau—" Seeing an expressionless mask settle over his face, she caught her breath and began again, "I ordered my trousseau from that St. Louis store where I used to get all my things, and it's come, and I've made a mistake in my check stubs or something, and . . . and there just isn't any money to pay for it."

She looked up at him humbly, feeling very small and foolish. "I don't know why I'm so stupid," she said fiercely. "No wonder the ranch is mortgaged. I can't even add."

Ty laughed, pushing his hat back on his sandy head, and she fixed hopeful eyes on him. He had been getting her out of scrapes ever since she was in pigtails. He would help her now.

"How much do you need?" he asked.

"A hundred dollars." His mouth opened, then he shut it firmly. "I know that seems an awful lot," said Nancy, "but I . . . I wanted to look nice."

Ty threw up his hand as a cowman, jogging by on a bony pinto, called "Good morning" to them. "Howdy, Frank?" His eyes narrowed suddenly, widened in an unseeing stare over Nancy's head.

"Maybe I can straighten things out," he told her in a strange voice. "Meet me here in fifteen minutes."

"He looks tired," thought Nancy, watching him swing around the corner a little later. "So tired and wretched. I'll make him stay, and Julian'll give him a raise or I'll—"

"O. K.," said Ty, coming back, his eyes crinkling in their old smile. "Now you can get your clothes."

"Oh-h!" She let out her breath. "I was frantic. But what did you do? What on earth was wrong?"

"Bank tellers can get balled up, too, sometimes," he told her carelessly. "But you're all set now."

"I wouldn't be if—" Nancy stopped to steady her voice. "I couldn't ever get along if you didn't help me out."

They gazed at each other, their eyes mirroring the emotion that rose electrically about them. His mouth quivered in a wry, tender smile, and Nancy swayed toward him.

"Ty—"

A voice spoke behind her, spun her around. "Oh," she gasped, trying to appear delighted, "hello, Julian."

"Why didn't you let me know you were in town, Nancy?" He closed a possessive hand on her elbow and nodded curtly to Ty, his dark face rigid with displeasure. "And why are you standing here on the street? I'd like to talk to you, if you can spare the time."

"Why, of course." She smiled nervously at the two of them, grew weak with relief when Ty took an easy departure.

"You and that foreman of yours seem to have a lot to talk about," accused Julian, piloting her into a drugstore.

She strove for a matter-of-fact tone. "I couldn't run the ranch without Ty. He's been there so long, you know."

"Well, he can keep his place and stay away from you. I've seen the way he looks at you. My wife isn't going to associate with the help."

"Julian! He isn't the help. Dad loved him like a son. But let's not bother about him," she begged, catching Julian's icy stare. "Tell me what you've been doing. Did you sell the old Colwell place?"

Describing his latest real-estate deal put Julian into high good humor, and after their lemonades he walked back to the buggy with Nancy, flatteringly ardent and attentive. She let him kiss her cheek, waved "good-by" and sternly lectured herself all the way to the express office. He was charming, he loved her, he wanted nothing but her happiness, and she was simply going to stop this nonsense and be happy.

The packages and boxes had been piled around her and she was pulling on her gloves when a plump, florid figure appeared in the wide doorway, a sheaf of papers in his hand, his bushy hair, eyebrows and mustaches all bristling with energy. He hailed her in a voice attuned to the open range.

"Go out to the house and take dinner with us. Louise's ma's sick, and she's pretty lonesome, stayin' in so close."

Smiling, Nancy shook her head. "I can't stay, Uncle Tom, but I'll drive by. Louise will want to see my things."

He bustled down the steps, wedged himself between the wheels to regard her fondly from bright-blue eyes. "Kind of a surprise to me, you marryin' Gravette," he told her. "I been hopin' you and Ty'd hitch up sometime. Fine feller, Ty."

"Y-yes," stammered Nancy, aware that her burning face was under scrutiny, "but he's always been like . . . like a brother."

"Don't look at you like one," observed the old man dryly. "But long's you're happy, I've got no call to complain."

Oh, why had he said that?—thought Nancy, urging her placid horse into an unwilling trot. She was happy. She was fond of Julian. If she could only stop this silly mooning—

The familiar, sunlit streets, the neighbors who called or waved to her as she passed, Louise's little dog that came scampering across the yard in welcome, all helped restore her composure, and she gathered an armful of boxes and ran into the house almost gayly.

Soon, she and Louise were rustling through clouds of tissue paper, covering bed and chairs with shoes, dresses and petal-tinted lingerie. Thin, dark Louise's wistful face took on an enraptured glow, and she caught up one garment after another to exclaim over a clever neckline, a row of buttons or a gleaming texture. With a shy, "May I?" she draped the soft red woolen suit around her and, moving in front of the mirror, viewed herself breathlessly.

"You're lovely in that shade," cried Nancy. "I only hope it does as much for me."

"I never knew how to dress," said Louise miserably. "If I had, if Frank could ever see me looking the way I ought to look—" She flushed and bit back the rest.

"Why, Louise!" Nancy's arms went around her. "I'll help you select an outfit. I'd love to. You'll be so pretty, he won't be able to resist you." Then, "I've got to go. Sarah's making jelly, and we'll have no dinner if I don't cook it." She was gathering up her scattered possessions. "When your mother wakes, tell her I'll come again. And we'll plan your wardrobe!"

Quiet, shy Louise in love! On her way home, Nancy determined to encourage the budding romance. "I'll help her, somehow," she thought, "and so help myself. For unless I keep every moment filled—"

Her eyes strayed to the crossroad, fixed in puzzlement. A cream-colored horse, its rider leading a pinto—that was Buck, but certainly not Ty. A little frightened, she halted at the intersection and, when they came nearer, recognized Frank. He reined up, grinning broadly.

"What are you doing on Ty's horse?" she demanded.

"He's my horse." Frank slapped Buck's neck and ran a hand through the creamy mane. "Bought him this mornin'."

"Ty didn't sell you that horse," said Nancy flatly. "He loves Buck better than anything in the world."

"Mebbe so, but he said he had to have a hundred dollars, pronto, and we made the trade."

Nancy's heart was dying within her. "Oh, Ty!" she thought. "You gave up all you had left, just for me. But I'll get him back." Frantically, she searched her mind. The calves were promised to Mike Wilson. Frank had alfalfa of his own.

"You're lookin' mighty nice this mornin'," Frank observed. "Ain't a girl in this country wears her clothes like you do." He edged closer, craning his neck at the jumble around her. "Looks like you're goin' to be dolled up, sure enough, now."

Clothes—Louise—that was it! "I'm going to buy Buck," she announced bluntly. "I'll give you a hundred dollars."

Frank's pale eyes bulged in alarm. "Oh, no, you ain't, Miss Nancy. I been tryin' to buy this horse two years."

"I'll give you the buggy to boot. You could take your girl driving."

"Not with any of my cayuses, I couldn't," said Frank. "They'd have it and her in a ditch, fust thing."

"Now listen, Frank. It's not fair

to take advantage of Ty when he's in a tight spot. He'll die without Buck." Frank remained unimpressed. "I'll give you the hundred dollars and this horse and buggy," cried Nancy recklessly. "And you know it's the best bargain you'll ever get as long as you live."

Frank's hat settled over his nose as he scratched the back of his head. "We-e-ell," he drawled, "guess I better take that. I need me a good drivin' outfit."

"Come on back to town with me. I'll have the money in a half-hour and meet you at the blacksmith shop."

He swerved in ahead of her, his elbows rising and falling with Buck's gallop. Speeding after him, Nancy felt it sheer good luck that she had worn Levis and boots that morning. And it was nothing less than providential that Julian had seen her only where and when he did. She would be married in her old blue crêpe which, since he was hardly a spendthrift, might strike him as eminently suitable.

Back at Allison's, she ran up the steps and inside, calling Louise. Allison followed his daughter from the dining room, his jaws in motion over a tucked-in napkin.

"Just in time for dinner, honey," he beamed.

"I haven't a minute. Louise, you liked my outfit so much—will you buy it for what it cost me?"

They looked at her and at each other in mute astonishment, then Allison came over and took hold of her arm. "What's the trouble, child?"

"Oh"—she mustn't cry—"I've just found out Ty sold Buck to pay for my clothes. I thought I had the money in the bank, but I didn't. He loves Buck. I won't let him do it!" Her voice trailed off in smothered sobs.

"Now, now!" Allison patted her shoulder. "If Louise wants the duds, you can bet her pa wants her to have them. Louise"—he glared, his mustaches puffing in and out—"bring me a pen, quick. What you waitin' on?

"Nancy, girl"—still patting her shoulder clumsily—"I feel mighty bad you didn't let me know how hard up you was. Me and your pa come out to this country together, and he was the best friend I ever had. Whyn't you call on your uncle Tom?"

Nancy laid her hand on his knotty one. "I was so ashamed, having to borrow money. I wanted to get things in shape myself."

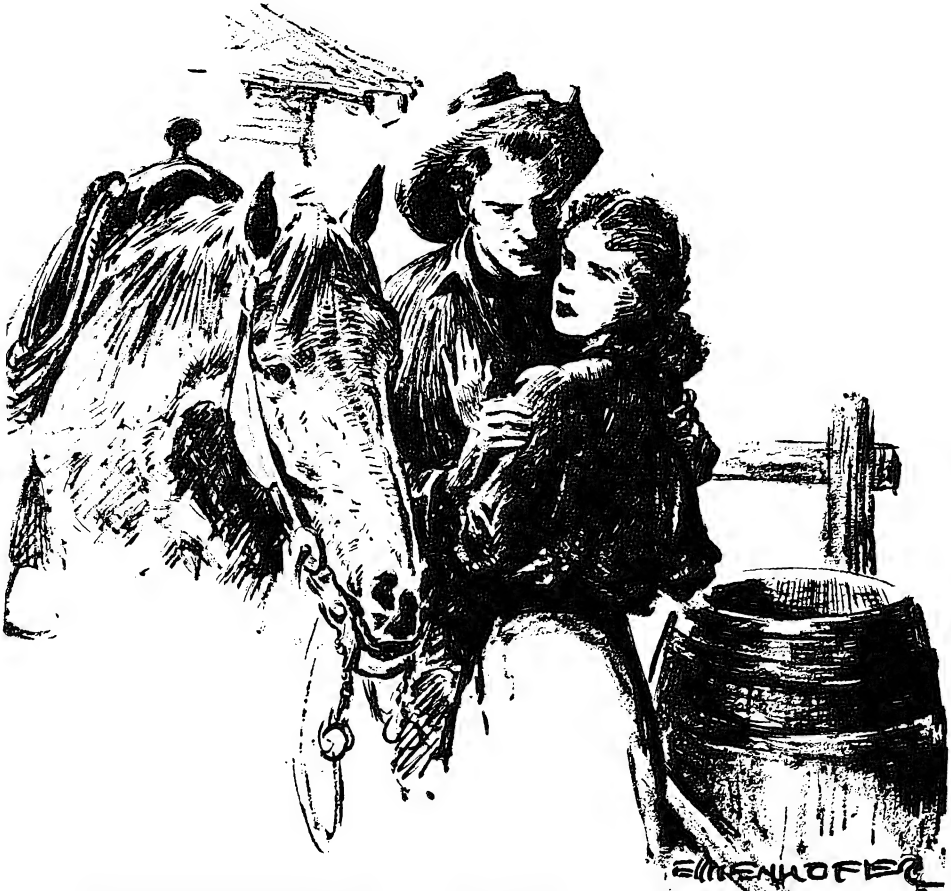
"You take this," he told her, blotting the check. "You take this and keep them pretty clothes."

"Oh, no, no. Thank you, Uncle Tom, but I couldn't." Laughing tremulously, she threw her arms around his neck. "Come to my wedding and see how nice I'll look in my old ones."

Lightly, proudly, Buck carried her along, tugging at the bits as if he, too, were picturing Ty's amazement. If Julian ever heard of this!—thought Nancy. But all her life was to be Julian's. Ty would have only Buck. Just a cream-colored horse, while the years dragged on and on— But she mustn't think of it. Mustn't let her heart come up and choke her when she remembered his kiss.

And Julian would kiss her, as was his right, but with an air of secret amusement that made her uncomfortable and self-conscious. Shuddering, she put Buck into a lope. At the creek halfway home, she stopped to let him drink, then rode back under the trees, dismounted and threw herself down on the soft, cool grass. Her thoughts whirled feverishly.

Ty. Julian. Debts. If it weren't for Julian, she could not keep the ranch. Because of him, Ty was going away. And there were dear old Sarah and Steve who'd been at the Bar K ever since her parents came West, penniless, and if the bank foreclosed, homeless. But she and Ty had their own rights, their own lives to live. What was the use, the sense in being miserable when you could help it? She'd beg the bank for one more chance. If that failed—Oh, better starve, better live in a hut than lose Ty. Tears slid down her cheeks.



He took her by the shoulders. "I suppose you think I'll hang around here seeing you married to another man! Well, no, thanks!"

"Dad," she said aloud, "I can't keep my promise. I tried to, but I can't." She sobbed despairingly for a minute, then from a corner of her memory came something her father had said long ago:

"A man is no better than his word."

His face came before her, patient, wise and kind. People said of him that he typified the West at its finest and that she, his daughter, was like him. But was she? Never would it have occurred to him to evade an obligation, no matter how inconvenient or unpleasant. She remembered how once he'd ridden all night through a raging blizzard simply to be at home for her birthday, as he had promised, and how wonderful had been the knowing he would come.

Things like that, thought Nancy, while the tears dried on her face, gave one's whole life a blessed, warming stability, a sense of being safely anchored, of knowing exactly where you were. They were part of the pattern which had shaped this country she loved and had been left for her, for everybody. Such small pieces made it up, and if you broke even one—

There was a little nicker a few yards away, and Buck stepped up carefully to her, his nose reaching out, his eyes soft and luminous. She leaned her forehead against him, taking what comfort she could from his friendly nearness, for everything was clear to her now and in the long, coming years she'd have nothing but a promise to keep, a pattern to go by.

The ranch seemed barer and lonelier than ever when they got home, and although Buck whinnied eagerly, Ty failed to materialize. Feeling lost and miserable, Nancy rode around the shop, the bunkhouse, the barn, and found Steve. He goggled at her over an armload of hay.

"Where's yore horse 'n' buggy?"

"Where's Ty?"

"W'y, I happened to look outta the haymow window a little bit ago," said Steve, avoiding the main point as usual, "and seen Clyde Patton drivin' in. Aimin' to steal something again, more'n likely." He spat at a passing horned toad. "Ty's saddled the sorrel and gone to see about it. But where's—"

Nancy was wheeling her horse, calling back, "I'm going."

Across the dry fork of the creek, she topped a brush-covered knoll that overlooked the wide, flat fields, reined up short. Halted in the growth a little farther on, Ty was gazing tensely beyond him. Patton's wagon, in which a tow-headed little boy was sitting, had been drawn up near the old derrick, and a few steps away, talking earnestly, were Patton and Julian.

It all looked somehow furtive, disquieting, and Nancy could hear the heavy thumping of her heart. Why had Julian come to this out-of-the-way place? What possible business had he with a man like Clyde Patton?

While the men nodded and gesticulated vigorously, a calf ambled through the open gap. Patton dived at it, flung his hat to turn it back. Blatting and kicking, it streaked under the noses of the dozing team. They reared, plunged forward. Julian, directly in their path, sprang nimbly to one side, and as Patton shouted and made a furious rush for the lines, they went into a gallop. The wagon lurched over a shallow ditch, throwing the child backward. A tin bucket toppled from the seat, and with its rolling clatter under their heels, with Patton in desperate, futile pursuit, the team tore across the field.

Nancy gave a cry of horror, but before she could move, Ty was already out in the open, low on his horse's neck. She heard his sharp, "Catch 'em!" saw the sorrel stretch to a run. Patton's team was at full speed, the lines flying about them in the dust. The little boy had regained his feet, and above the rumble of wheels, the drumming of hoofs, rose his terrified screams as he clutched the sideboard, was jolted free and caught at it again.

With each powerful stride the sorrel drew nearer and nearer, now alongside. Ty pulled him close to the spinning wheels, leaned far over and, in a flash of long arms, snatched the child out and across his saddle. Instantly, the wagon struck a boulder, bounded into the air, crashed bottomside up.

Nancy was limp, trembling all over, and tears came to her eyes when Ty galloped back and put the little boy into his father's arms. For a long moment Patton stood utterly motionless, his dark, unkempt head pressed against the small flaxen one. Then, with a gesture that held both dignity and humility, he reached up to shake Ty's hand.

Suddenly remembering Julian, Nancy looked around, and there he was striding toward his horse as if, now that the play had ended, he sought the quickest possible exit. Quietly, she rode down the slope, slid from the saddle and walked out of the mesquite not twenty feet behind him.

"Julian!" she called, and he whirled, every vestige of color leaving his face.

"Why"—he moistened his lips—"hello." After only a second's hesitation, a glance over his shoulder, he came forward jauntily. "I thought you were in town. I was just going up to the house and wait for you."

"Julian," said Nancy in a low, controlled voice, "why didn't you stop that team?"

His eyes flickered above a thin smile. "My dear, I tried to, but they were gone before I could reach them. Come, now"—taking her arm—"we'll go. Nobody's hurt—"

Nancy freed herself, stepped back. "I saw everything. You didn't even try. And that poor little boy might have been killed."

Two spots of color sprang to his cheekbones, and for the first time, she realized how close-set his eyes were. "With our wedding so near," he said silkily, "I wouldn't have supposed you'd want me to risk my life."

"Wedding!" Nancy stared at him, sickened. "Do you think I'd marry a coward?"

"I'm aware," he answered, his lips curling, "that you prefer men of another class. I've been wondering if you meant to marry one, and—"

Nancy's slap finished the sentence. He raised his fingers to the marks her own had left, and all at once she felt afraid. His face twisted. Seizing her, he shook her viciously. Then, stopping abruptly, he shrugged, laughed. But there was no mirth in his eyes, only a cold calculation. And his hands were still hurting her.

"What a little spitfire you are," he said lightly. "We mustn't quarrel, my dear. You know I was merely teasing."

Ty rode up in a spatter of gravel, leaped from his horse and plucked Julian off as he would a noxious bur. "Mind if I handle this?" he asked Nancy.

"Go right ahead."

His fist landed like a battering-ram, and Julian sprawled full length. He lay there a minute, slowly got to his feet. His hand flashed to his hip, and Nancy caught the glint of a gun.

She flung herself at him. "Ty!"

As the gun roared, Ty ducked and, in the same motion, made a flying tackle and took Julian down with him. His fists drove savagely into the upturned face, brought a trickle of blood above the sneering mouth. He gave a final smash, got up, dropped the gun into his pocket.

"I ought to kill you," he said through his teeth, "but get going."

Nancy turned away, not wanting ever again to see the man who walked past her and cursed as he walked. When pounding hoofbeats were only a distant rhythm, Ty put his hands on her shoulders and squared her around to face him.

"Well," he said softly, "you rushed in and saved my life, didn't you?"

Nancy looked up at him, and everything—the runaway, the bitter humiliation, the thought of the promise she could never keep—all gathered and burst like flood waters. She leaned against him and sobbed heartbrokenly.

Ty's arms held her tight. "Don't cry, darling. Don't. I've got something to—"

A little nicker from the mesquite brought his head up with a jerk. He stood thunderstruck while Buck trotted over and began nibbling daintily at his sleeve. Blankly, he asked:

"What's he doing here?"

"He belongs here," said Nancy in a husky voice. "I—"

"You what?" prompted Ty unsteadily.

"I sold my . . . my trousseau to Louise, and . . . and my horse and buggy to Frank so—"

She couldn't say another word. She didn't need to, for Ty was kissing her, shutting off her breath, and she was kissing him. After a while she drew back, her arms still locked around his neck.

"I won't mind being poor with you, Ty. We'll manage, somehow. And maybe—"

"But you won't be poor," he interrupted. "Patton just told me. While we were all laid up with colds last winter, Gravette got some men and a bailer over here—" He paused maddeningly, grinned down at her and dropped a quick, light kiss at the corner of her open mouth. "They made a formation test and found oil. It's there, right now, under that nice little cap."

Oil! Oil on the Bar K! Nancy raised misty eyes to the battered old derrick her father had built. Bathed in golden sunshine, it seemed suddenly proud, splendid and triumphant.

"Dad knows," she thought. Then Buck nudged her with his creamy head and she stumbled back into Ty's arms.

THE END.

* * * * * * * * * * *

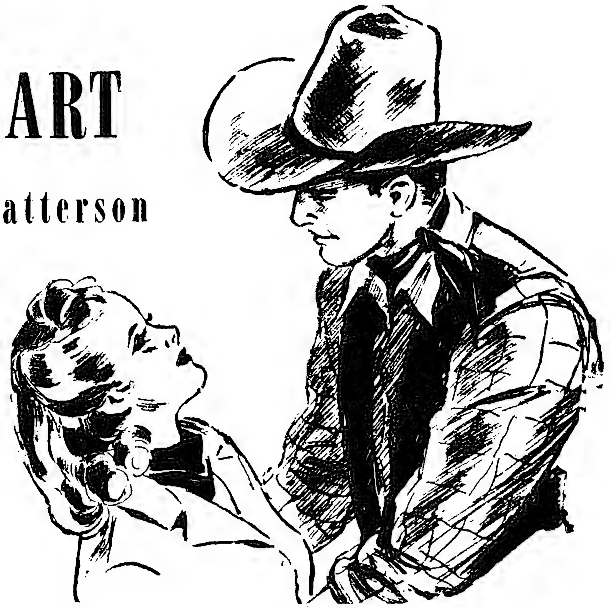
MISSING

There is no voice on the trail
Or the range, no eager hands
Easing the lift, and no feet but mine
Climbing the so-steep hill—
Gone is the dear voice that queried
And answered, the so-capable hands
That loved and labored,
And the lithe steps marking the way
Beside me—
Only the long-beloved memories remain.

Grace Meredith.

THE GAL WAS SMART

by Rod Patterson



After racing Tuck Merritt to the float and back, Karen Carter stretched her slim, sun-tanned legs on the warm sand of the ranch swimming pool in sheer, languorous enjoyment. The Nile green of her strapless bathing suit gleamed coolly in the sunlight, and as she pulled off her cap her upswept curls spilled out in a burst of gold.

"Tuck," she announced abruptly to the lean-limbed man who lay at her side, "I've fallen in love with a goof who's too darned stupid to realize it."

The man sat up, hugging his knees. He looked down at the girl unbelievingly.

"Shucks, Karen, there isn't a man in the county isn't loco about you. For that matter there isn't a man alive who'd turn down the chance to marry you. I—" Words failed Tuck Merritt. The faint, elusive perfume of her lifted to him; it gave him the slightly giddy sensation her nearness always caused.

Karen's level glance touched his bronzed shoulders almost caressingly. "What a rimfire spoofer you turned out to be, Tuck," she murmured. Her dark, upcurving lashes lowered suddenly as if to screen from his keen gray eyes the eager message in her own blue ones.

Tuck looked across the pool toward the distant sagebrush hills. "Oh, yeah? Why, pard, even a blind man could savvy it's Ben Tollard that's got you marked down in his tally book."

"So you think Ben's the lucky guy."

"Kid, I know it." Tuck's grin was a little bitter, for he, himself, had been in love with Karen ever since that night two years ago when J. B. Carter had given a big homecoming party in honor of his daughter's graduation from art school back East.

Tuck Merritt's Buckaroos had played for the dancing that night, and from an improvised bandstand overlooking the patio of J. B. Carter's big ranch, Tuck had watched fascinatedly while Karen, flushed and excited, had tripped the light fantastic with every young buck for forty miles around. She had been beautiful, unattainable, and had scarcely even noticed the slightly awed young man with the fiddle and the white Angora chaps who crooned: "The eyes of Texas are upon you—"

Only two years had elapsed since that night, and now, though a strange fate had brought them together, had made them really understanding friends, Karen seemed even more beautiful, more beyond his reach than ever.

The Buckaroos had been just a bunch of barnstorming one-night-standers two years ago. Now they were famous in three States, and played three nights a week over Station KYX at Silvertown. Silvertown proudly boasted two radio stations. The second was WRC, owned and operated as a hobby by John B. Carter, Karen's father. And Carter, cattleman of longhorn days, who owned nearly all the grazing range of Fossil County, wanted to control the air waves, too. For nearly a year he had tried without success to lure the Buckaroos away from KYX.

Well, Tuck Merritt had been on top of the world for quite a while now but, ironically, his success didn't get him what he really wanted most—blond, blue-eyed Karen Carter. But it had never occurred to him to face the facts and tell Karen that he loved her. Oil men and wealthy ranchers were constantly rushing her. Her way of life was synonymous with red-tiled haciendas, expensive cars and thoroughbred horses. Karen had always had everything she wanted, so why should she bother with an ex-cowhand, a crooning fiddle-scraper, even though he did have a few dollars in the bank? Karen would have to marry someone with a scad of money, or, anyway, a pedigree. Old J. B. Carter would see to that.

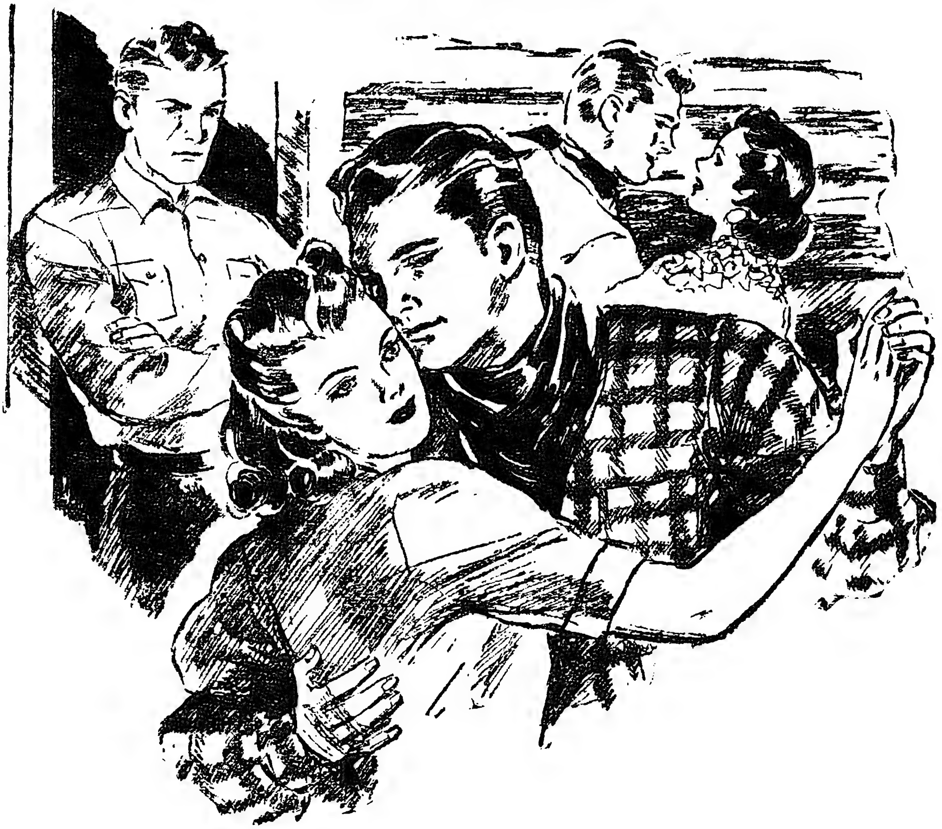
Tuck had been sure for a long time that Karen was in love with young Ben Tollard, the Carters' nearest neighbor. Tollard was all right, Tuck guessed, though he, Tuck, had never had much use for a man who called himself a Texan when he hardly knew one end of a steer from the other. But, after all, that probably wasn't anything against him. Somebody, though, ought to tip the blind fool off to the fact that the finest girl in the world had fallen for him.

Karen's husky voice brought Tuck back to earth with a jolt. "Ben Tollard—" Her tone was faintly mocking. "So I'm as obvious as that, am I?"

Tuck smiled tolerantly. "Don't try to cover up," he told her gently. "I've got two good eyes, kid, don't forget. And besides, you just said yourself—"

"Don't you dare go big brother on me, Tucker Merritt." Karen sat up abruptly, brushing the wet sand from her knees. She gave him a long look and her laugh was low and tantalizing and sent dangerous thoughts racing through his mind. "Well, Mister Fiddler Man," she said, "we'd better be dressing. It's an hour's drive to town and you have a rehearsal at four, you know. And I hope you haven't forgotten that audition you fixed for me with your studio." She reached out impulsively and took his hand. "Tuck, I do really appreciate your persuading them to listen to my voice. I'd much rather sing with you and the boys than paint silly pictures of cactus and chaparral and things."

"Forget it, kid." Tuck stood up, his black hair crisped back at the temples in spite of the hour he had spent in the water. "Look," he went on soberly, "I still think you're



Tuck had watched fascinatedly while Karen, flushed and excited, had tripped the light fantastic with every young buck for miles around.

wrong in not tipping J. B. off to this try-out of yours. What's he going to say when he finds out Karen Carter's auditioning for his competitor? Why, shucks, kid, the old boy'd go hog-wild if he even thought I'd dare show my face around here!"

Karen held out her hand and Tuck pulled her upright beside him. They stood there close together for a moment. Then Karen patted his cheek and said: "He'll say plenty, pard, but here's one little gal can handle old J. B."

He gave her a wry grin. "Hope you're right. Because he sure thinks the Buckaroos are pretty bad ever since we refused his offer to transfer our talents to WRC."

As they parted at the pool-side cabaña, Karen said, "I've a phone call to make, Tuck, so I may keep you waiting a moment. Drive your jellopy around in front of the house. I won't be long."

Tuck had little to say as they whirled to Silvertown in his open sports roadster. His mind was troubled by one thought—the dread of the outcome of Karen's try-out. It wasn't that she couldn't sing. She really could. But her voice wasn't tricky enough and it lacked a certain quality of tone, especially on the kind of stuff the Buckaroos had made famous—South Texas tunes of long ago. Karen just didn't have the punch to put over a song like "Diamond Joe," for instance.

Tuck supposed he should have told her the truth before she'd had time to set her heart on singing with the outfit. Wanting to see her happy, he'd got himself into this mess, so now all he could hope for was that the studio boss would let her down easy.

Silvertown was jammed to the beam ends with crowds who had come to town for the annual fair and rodeo, celebrating the first day of Frontier Week. Main Street was a kaleidoscope of color; toy balloons, flags, banners. Dust drifted in the strong September sunshine, and the sultry air was noisy with the *yip-yips* of men in ten-gallon hats and chaps and checkered shirts.

Tuck pulled the roadster up to the curb in front of the two-story building that housed Station KYX. Moodily preoccupied, he helped Karen from the car and they went into the building. The studio was on the second floor and when they entered it they found the Buckaroos in full regalia already on the rehearsal stage waiting for Tuck, obeying the little red bulb that glowed like a luminous eye in front of the center mike.

Tuck squeezed Karen's arm. "The boss is over there in the control room, but don't let that spook you. Just go up there with the boys and give, kid."

"You're—swell," Karen said with a little catch in her voice. "And I . . . I do feel a little spooky."

He patted her shoulder. "I'm a-rootin' for you," he whispered.

Tuck caught himself wishing she felt spooky enough to call the whole thing off. But she evidently didn't because she braced her slim shoulders and marched up onto the stage.

Tuck gave the signal to the control room and the light turned green. He called, "Try 'Texas Lullaby,' Karen," and nodded to Slim Hayes, the accordion player, then took a chair and listened tensely while Karen began to sing. But he couldn't relax, no matter how hard he tried. Through half-closed eyes he watched her there in the pale glow of the footlights, the powder-blue blouse she wore shining like an oyster shell in sunlight. Any good musician could have told her she had just another pleasing voice. But there was a certain quality of sadness, or was it gravity, about her that touched Tuck deeply. And then thinking of Ben Tollard, he felt a sudden surge of bitterness.

He was vaguely conscious that her eyes were holding him steadily; she was watching his every move. He reached for a cigarette, letting his glance go to the glass-inclosed control room where the studio manager stood. And then the manager caught his eyes and shook his head in a vigorous gesture of negation. Well, that was that. It looked like Tuck was going to have to break the news to her himself.

When Karen finished the song he rose slowly, reluctantly, the feeling of dread a definite weight upon him. As he moved forward there was a sudden commotion behind him and, as he turned, a door banged open and two men burst into the studio. One was Karen's father. Stout, ruddy-faced J. B. Carter was puffing for breath, his pudgy hands knotted at his sides. The other was Ben Tollard, dark and slim in a sports suit and cowhide vest. There was a faintly derisive smile on Ben's handsome face.

Tuck blocked their way. "Now hold on, Mr. Carter," he said quickly. "You can blame me for Karen's being here."

Carter glared. "I get it," he sputtered. "Tryin' to run a blasted sandy on me, huh? Tryin' to make a fool out of me, that's your game! First you turn me down when I offer to put you and your blamed hilly-billies on a good program, and now you're workin' to get my daughter on my competitor's time! Well, you won't get away with it, Merritt!" He whirled toward the stage. "Karen!" he cried peremptorily. "Come down here and—"

But Karen wasn't on the stage. She was standing at Tuck's side, her head held high, her cheeks rose-colored. "Keep your hair on, dad. I'm old enough to know what I'm doing. And I haven't forgotten you said I had a voice like a burro in distress. I guess this proves—"

Ben Tollard cut her off with a mocking laugh. "That's putting it mildly, kid. I heard you wind up that number. Gosh, was it lousy!"

The only part of Tuck's body that moved was his right arm. His clenched fist exploded on the point of Ben Tollard's jaw, and that surprised young man sat down suddenly and heavily on the floor. He let out a single pained "Ouch!" and began rubbing his chin dazedly.

Tuck's voice was hard. "I don't aim to stand around and hear you or any other punk say that about Karen." Then he turned, contrition etched on his lean face. "I'm sorry, honey. I . . . I couldn't help taking a crack at him."

Though Karen's voice trembled a little when she spoke, it wasn't tears that sparkled in her blue eyes. "Tuck," she said severely, "I was watching your face all the time I was singing that last verse, and I could tell. You . . . you think I'm bad, too!"

"Karen!" Tuck seized her by the shoulders. "Darling, don't say that! Why, I think you're wonderful! Even your voice— You're adorable! I've always wanted to tell you that. I—" He was holding her against him now.

"Oh, Tuck dear." Karen pressed her shining head to his chest, let her arms push slowly up behind his shoulders. "Darling, I was so afraid," she whispered into his vest, "you'd never get up nerve to tell me that!"

Sudden understanding burst like a light on Tuck. "You mean you could—you would—"

Her blond head trembled violently with the vigor of her nod.

"Golly!" Tuck was holding her tightly. "And I nearly lost you! Have I been a dope!"

Karen pushed from his arms abruptly, her face radiant. "Everybody's staring." She gave a happy laugh. "I'll meet you tonight, darling, after the broadcast. Now I've got to get dad and Ben out of here before they're thrown out." She seized the dumfounded J. B. Carter by one arm, the still-dazed Tollard by the other, and waltzed them hurriedly out of the studio.

When the door closed behind them, however, she did something that would have puzzled Tuck Merritt if he could have seen. She reached up suddenly and patted the injured jaw of Ben Tollard. "You're a peach, Ben." Then her slim heels came up from the floor and she planted a kiss squarely on his surprised chin. "When I phoned you from the ranch I was afraid you might not be able to locate dad, or that you'd get my orders mixed. Pal, you done noble!"

Ben Tollard managed a crooked grin. "Holy hat," he groaned, "you told me to call your singing lousy and I did! But if I'd known it would earn me a poke in the jaw, well—"

Karen laughed. "Well, it *is* lousy." Then to the astonished J. B.: "Calm down, dad. Tuck and the Buckaroos are as good as signed for WRC right now. Tuck just *couldn't* refuse his own father-in-law!"

THE END.

THE HITCHING POST

by Naiia Andreyeff

Did you know that every person's handwriting shows the real character and personality hidden beneath outward characteristics? Would you like to find out what your best points are, your faults and how to correct them? Handwriting analysis also helps to determine whether a man and woman in love are suited to each other. It helps straighten out marriage tangles.

If you wish your handwriting analyzed, simply fill in coupon at the end of this department and mail. Send a self-addressed envelope if you wish personal reply. At least five lines of handwriting are required for each analysis; writing must be in ink.

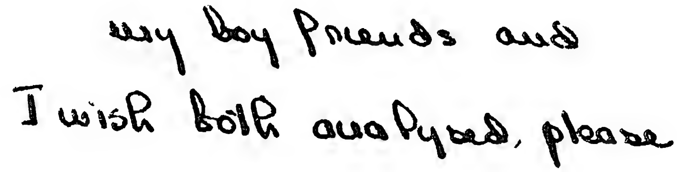
A good deal of the dust of curiosity about ourselves and others, falls into the byways of life. Most of it is hopelessly strewn about, but some of it is retrieved and held up for a moment as something to be considered for possible hints which might even in a small degree help us to better understand ourselves. Handwriting analysis is a very definite and reliable "hint" in this respect. Your character traits, talents, abilities, emotional and mental qualities, et cetera, are revealed in every line of your handwriting.

Your handwriting presents to the graphologist what a good photograph of you presents to your friends—it reveals certain characteristics. If you are likable and have a pleasing personality, it is bound to show in your face and bearing. A person's handwriting, however, discloses much more. By looking at a photograph you can't be sure if a person means what he says, if he is sincere and true, affectionate or cold, generous or selfish. But a study of his handwriting will give him away.

It seems to me that few other qualities in human nature interest us more than the capacity for friendship and love between men and women. However, it is necessary for two people to be suited to each other in order that they may get the most out of their association. They must also see things in the same light, and have more or less the same likes and dislikes. But we mustn't overlook the fact that opposites are often subject to a fatal fascination that draws them together. However, fascination is a good deal like curiosity—once satiated, the novelty and sparkle soon subside and boredom sets in.

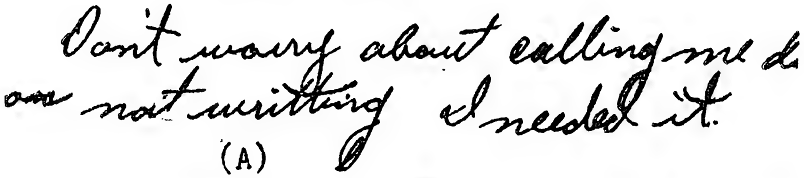
Handwriting reflects love and happiness as well as other traits. Many rifts between friends, between young people in love, and husbands and wives may be prevented by better understanding. We all know that the ideal marriage is the one in which the man and woman go through life spiritually as well as physically hand in hand, sharing together the good things as well as the bad. And if you have a good understanding of yourself as well as of the person you love, it will increase a hundredfold your chances for a happy courtship and a lasting marriage. Knowing which character traits to encourage and which to curb, you will be better fitted to hold the one who has won your heart.

The old saying that actions speak louder than words ties right in with handwriting analysis, because handwriting is an action which will tell you things that conversation might never. About the first thing we like to find out about new friends is if these friends are really as regular and sincere as they seem, or merely pretending. A peek at their handwriting will easily tell you what is what.



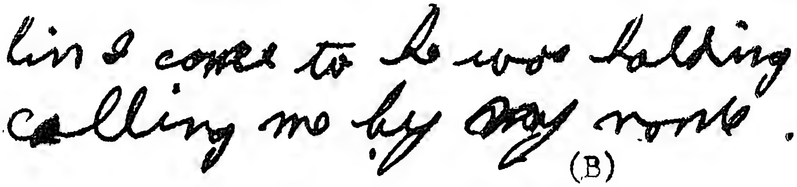
my boy friends and
I wish both analyzed, please

(Miss J.M.)



Don't worry about calling me d
on not writing I needed it.

(A)



lin I come to be was talking
calling me by my name.

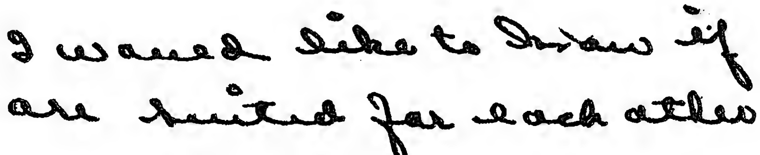
(B)

Aside from actions, our feelings are not to be always mistrusted either. Sometimes we feel things about other people; we don't quite know how or why we arrive at certain conclusions, but we do—and in the long run we find out we are right, or at least that we weren't far from wrong. Would this discovery show also in handwriting? The answer is, yes. As an example, here's a letter from a young woman who has recently met two nice young men. But somehow she just can't quite let herself care for either one as much as she would like. "I would certainly like to know," she writes, "why, when I'm on the verge of taking these two young men seriously, there's that certain 'something' that dampens my enthusiam and interest. I'm in my twenties and old enough to make up my own mind. One of these boys is four years my senior, and the other exactly my own age. Both are good-looking, and I like them and enjoy dating them. I think if I gave them the slightest encouragement they would make love to me. But something always stops me, and so far I haven't even let either one kiss me. Can you tell me what's wrong?"

First of all, your own handwriting is that of a fastidious and perhaps even somewhat "choosey" person, although no one can really hold that against you. The important thing is that your handwriting shows breaks between letters in words, and this means that you are quite intuitive and have an instinctive feeling about things, people and situations. If something is wrong, more often than not you just *know* it's wrong. In other words, this is probably why that certain "something" dampens your enthusiasm in so far as your friendship with these two young men is concerned. You are also idealistic and rather hard to please because of your desire to have, as the old saw goes, "a place for everything and everything in its place."

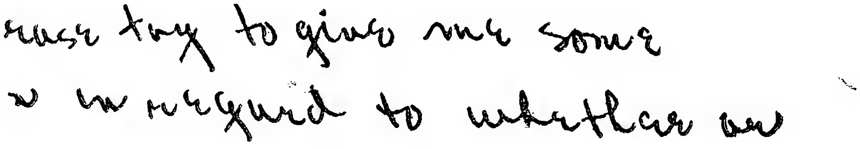
Perhaps it is just as well that you have been cautious in cultivating the acquaintance of these two boys, because judging from the comparison of the personalities and character traits shown in their handwriting and in your own, neither one is suited to you. My opinion is that their main attraction for you probably lies in their appearances. When it comes to mental and emotional make-up, neither man is of the type who could hold your interest indefinitely.

A friendly and sociable person is shown by sample A, but some of the t bars are curved, like upturned bows, indicating that the writer is impetuous and has little real liking for shouldering responsibilities that may interfere with his preference for an easygoing existence. He is affectionate and demonstrative, has a sense of humor, a liking for activity, but no great ambition or desire for buckling down to steady routine. He is likable, and his attentiveness appeals to you. And although you might get along all right as friends, your temperaments differ to such an extent that any-



I would like to know if
are suited for each other

(Charlotte)

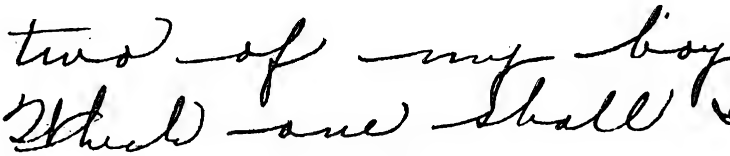


ease try to give me some
e in regard to whether we

(Friend)

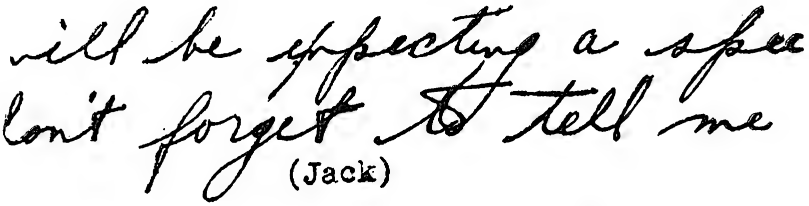
thing in the line of serious romance would have a pretty shaky foundation.

The same deductions may be applied to B. Only here it is even more difficult to understand in what respect he holds any interest for you. This man is emotionally as unstable as the weather. He seldom stops to think things over, and his temper probably expresses itself in a manner favored by an undisciplined, spoiled child. He is shrewd, sociable and likable, but rather careless and more inconsistent than A. He also has a lively imagination, is demonstrative, jealous, possessive, and probably not slow in making conversation. His changeability may give others the impression that he is versatile. In his own way he probably means well enough, and does the best he can. But neither he nor the other young man is suited to you, so by all means follow your instinct and, instead of continuing your acquaintance with these boys, I suggest that you cultivate other friendships. And before you become deeply interested in another man, keep in mind these few easy pointers: The handwriting of the man with whom you could get along well should lean not too much to the right; the letters should be rounded, or semiangular, with well-proportioned capitals and medium, even pen pressure.



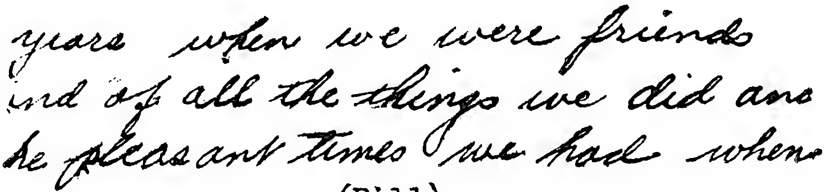
two of my boy-
Which one Shall I

(Marian)



ill be expecting a spec
lon't forget to tell me

(Jack)



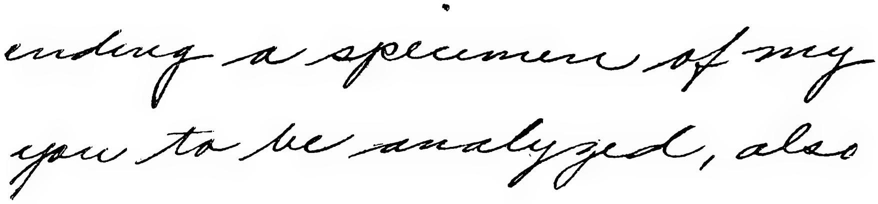
years when we were friends
ind of all the things we did and
he pleasant times we had when

(Bill)

ANSWERS.

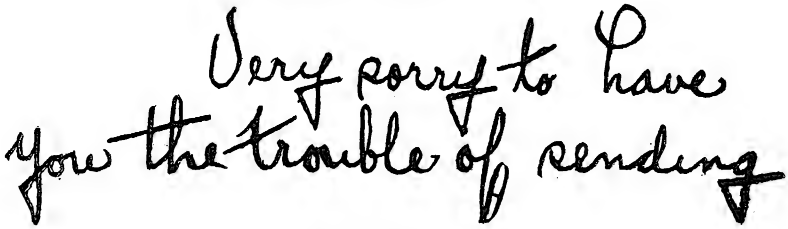
Charlotte J., Staten Island.

Backhand writing always indicates that a person lives a great deal within himself. He keeps his emotions, thoughts and ideas to himself, or herself, as the case may be. What happens when people of this type try to find happiness together? It would be easier to guess at the weather six months hence. There is no foretelling if you and your friend could get along all right for any great length of time. You say that you've known each other only three months and, so far, the sailing has been smooth enough. You have much in common; like the same things, enjoy the same pastimes, share the same opinions and, in other words, all's well. But —and this should be spelled with a capital B—when it comes to really giving affection, showing attention and demonstrating tenderness, that's another story. You see, my dear, neither of you is outwardly demonstrative, although you both are affectionate and ardent.



ending a specimen of my
you to be analyzed, also

(Katharine)



Very sorry to have
you the trouble of sending

(Friend)

You would expect *him* to show his affection and do all the little things that are dear to every woman's heart and assure you of his love for you, and the same would be in *his* mind. If your handwritings are not cultivated but naturally backhand, you would both expect to take a great deal. But someone has to do the giving. In fact, in a happy partnership it must be give and take in all things. My advice to you is to remain on friendly terms if you wish, but each of you should have friends whose handwriting is either upright or at least one or two degrees to the right. As friends you fascinate each other; as marriage partners you might be disappointed in each other because of the sameness of temperament and emotional make-up. You belong to the same type and you *might* make a go of it. Your guess is as good as mine.

Marian B., Burlington, Vt.

Of the two young men in question, I would say that Jack is far better suited to you than Bill. Both are agreeable, likable young men, with even-tempered dispositions and affectionate natures. However, Jack's handwriting shows a young man who is progressive, mentally more alert and active than Bill, and more persistent in his undertakings. So I think you have made a wise choice in becoming engaged to Jack, and after you are married there should be little trouble in keeping everything running smoothly. Of the two boys, Jack has the ability to see two sides of a question. Bill, on the other hand, is rather settled in his ways and ideas, and is not so ambitious as Jack.

Your own handwriting is that of a fun-loving, cheerful and optimistic person. You are sensible and practical, careful, thorough and dependable. You can be quite determined, though few suspect it because you are agreeable and friendly at all times. In your affections you are sympathetic and demonstrative, sincere and warm-hearted. But you do not let your feelings guide you in making decisions. Rather, you reason things out quite calmly and with logic. I am sure that if you delve further into the matter, you will find that you and Jack see things from the same point of view much more readily than you and Bill do. A little checking on this point will prove interesting. Try it.

Katharine A., Santa Fe, N. M.

You have sized up this young man correctly, in so far as his character is shown by handwriting. His writing indicates a rather domineering, stubborn nature, as you can see by the three-cornered y loops, although he may show these traits only under strained circumstances. When the handwriting is fairly rounded, these angular lower loops on letters like y, g, and j also mean courage. The almost upright slant of the writing shows a nature that is not very demonstrative, although he may be quite constant in his affections. The personality is pleasant, but not particularly sociable, and he is inclined to keep to himself. He is well-balanced, sensible and determined in his undertakings.

Your own handwriting reveals a very different nature. You are sensitive, gentle, sympathetic and can no more conceal or withhold your affection for someone you love than a bird can resist flying. In order to get along with this man you would have to soft-pedal your own ideas and inclinations and let him go on being king. I don't mean to say that he is intolerable or that you can't ever agree, but he is probably a strong believer in the idea that a man must at all times be head of the house and the wife merely an echo, although she should be on the spot to make his life happy, comfortable and enjoyable. I don't think you should make up your mind to marry him just yet. Try other boy friends for a while.

* * * * * * * *

I inclose handwriting specimen for analysis.

Name ....

Street and No. ....

City.. State.......................

Coupon must be mailed not later than June 10, 1943.

Don't forget your stamped, self-addressed envelope.

LET'S PLAY CHECKERS!

by Millard Hopper

World's Unrestricted Checker Champion

Millard Hopper is well known to the checker-playing world. He is the author of several books on the game and has given numerous exhibitions, sometimes playing as many as fifty opponents at one time. He is at present giving checker demonstrations at the various army camps and U. S. O. units, and has arranged with the editorial staff of Romantic Range to conduct a friendly checker department for the men in service as well as the folks at home.

Not long ago a friend said to me, "I know two people who have been playing checkers together for over thirty years. They ought to be good players by this time, don't you think?"

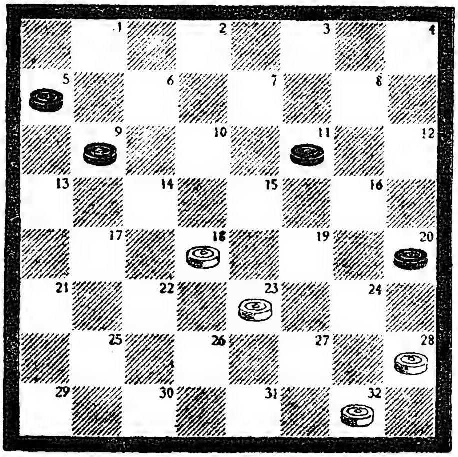
"It all depends," I replied. "If they confined their checker playing strictly to playing with each other then they are not much better than they were thirty years ago."

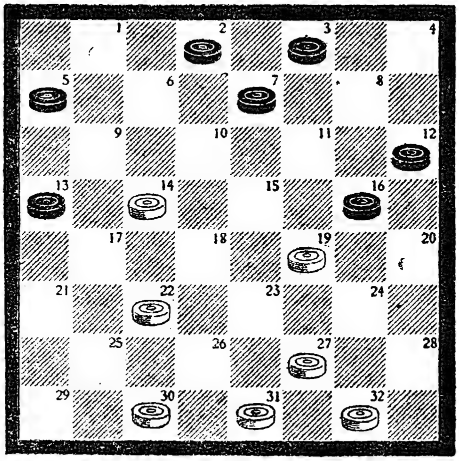
Playing checkers in itself does not necessarily imply improvement. In the case in point, the weaker of the players would eventually reach the level of the stronger player, but the stronger player having no advanced player to further his improvement, would decline if anything in his playing ability.

This same rule holds good in many things besides checkers, and if you endeavor to compete with better people in your profession, you will find yourself moving upward; otherwise, you slide down the hill.

If I had not taken the time as a youngster to locate the local checker experts in my city, I would undoubtedly have remained a fourth-rate checker pusher. But by contacting better players and getting beaten game after game, I quickly discovered my faults, and, by overcoming them, soon reached the ranks of the

A





B

experts with whom I had associated myself.

This knowledge should be very encouraging to the person who at the present time is subject to continual trimmings by some other player. At least, this person has the proper opponent by which he can measure his own improvement; try out the shots and strategies which are presented in these lessons; and gradually you'll perfect your game so that you'll be able to beat him.

In last month's issue we pointed out the need of breaking the King Row. In this article we illustrate a very clever combination used regularly by the checker professional.

First, we show how it crops up at the end of a game with only a few pieces on the board. Then we picture its arrival in the middle of the game.

The game has boiled down to four men each. It is White's turn to move, and in a few correct moves he can conclude the game and secure a startling victory.

White checkers to move and win.

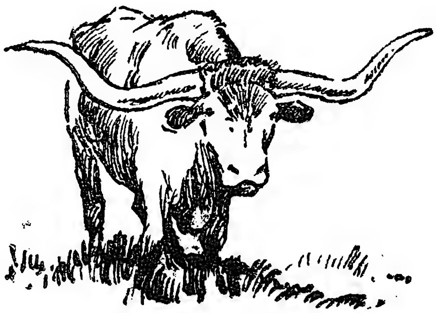
White's star moves are 28 to 24, compelling Black to jump 20 to 27. Then White plays 18 to 15; Black jumps 11 to 18, and White replies 23 to 14. When Black rejumps, the White man on square 32 captures two Black checkers and wins the game. (See board A.)

Now let us look at the same idea in a more advanced setting.

In this setting White gains his win by moving 22 to 18, allowing Black to jump 16 to 23. Then 14 to 10, 7 to 14, 18 to 9, 5 to 14, followed by 27 to 9. (See board B.)

If the student studies this carefully he will have learned one of the favorite combinations used by the checker expert.

If any one of our readers has some interesting game or position which he or she would like advice on, he can mail it to me, care of this magazine, and I will be glad to answer him or discuss it with him. Be sure that a self-addressed, stamped envelope is inclosed.



THE LARIAT OF LOVE

Birth numbers and the stars above reveal your fate in life and love.

by SHAWN ARLOW

JUNE—GEMINI—MERCURY—NUMBER 6

The Gemini-Number 6 is the all-embracing girl, but her degree of embracing you will depend on whether she will caress you or choke you; for she can do either with the grace and dignity of a Persian cat. Any man is at the mercy of a clever Gemini—and she doesn't have to be the Duchess of Windsor, either, for such is the heritage of this double control.

She can find joy in a cottage or castle; but she would like to have both, and then alternate. To restrict her in any way is to weaken her natural spontaneity. She is born to lead, never to follow. When forced to sublimate any of her inhibitions, she becomes a smoldering volcano ready to burst forth at a moment of pressure. She should find ways and means of suitable outlets for her emotions, even if expediency demands she cultivate new friends. In fact, change of scenery and associates is essential to her health and well-being, at least once a year.

She is a witty companion but a dangerous opponent. In conversation she is sharp, and it is not difficult for her to get under the skin of the thickest type of adversary. She does not have to study hard to know the answers. Put a Gemini girl of slight education among a group of intellectuals and no one will notice that she isn't one of them in background and training. Yes, she returns the radiance of those who shine around her. Such is the power of the Sun in Gemini. Sometimes it is uncanny.

Marriage is a mystery to her. In fact, few Gemini girls are ever sure of what they want. Sometimes they get more joy out of love by losing than winning. This girl can wrap her whole world in a garment of dreams, spun of the finest cloth, giving her a fabric of ecstasy which never could have been realized had she married the man. For she is different from others—a princess in her own right and in her world of imagination.

At times she prefers to be sad. It makes her feel better. Then the next moment she is singing or kicking her heels. For that reason, few people can understand her. It is seldom that another woman ever really knows her. Men are more likely to appreciate this world of moods and dual personality. She has a sense of humor of her own and is often tempted to smile when another person is pouring out his heart or carrying a torch for a lost love. She can sympathize with a person in real trouble, but don't expect sympathy from her if your pain is not genuine.

Deceive a Gemini and you wound her. And it takes long for her wound to heal. In fact she rarely ever forgives a willful hurt or meanness. She may want to, but some little imp of vindictiveness suddenly pricks her pride and she gives way to that impulse. Then she may go out of her way to undo the deed, but rather for the sake of sportsmanship than kindness or remorse. There are many case histories of Gemini people getting even for insults suffered in their youth. The little Gemini who used to live on the other side of the tracks never forgets those who snubbed her, even when she becomes a famous actress or successful author or businesswoman. She won't snub them in return. She will help them—she will heap coals of fire on their heads, until their toes are hot, too.

It has been said that the Gemini girl never is caught with her fan down. That is because she likes to enjoy a good smile when others are not aware that she is laughing at them.

But, in spite of that, she is a castle of sincerity and loyalty. She takes her own work very seriously and understands what she is doing. She doesn't win by luck, but brains. And in no respect is she lazy. Some might justifiably call her proud or fickle, but she is not fickle when she really is in love. Still it takes time and much courting to make her love emotion really start boiling. She can be in love with a man, however, just by observation and association, yet no one will ever surmise it. For that reason she would make a good diplomat or even a woman of international intrigue.

In her own set she is popular. In other sets she doesn't fare so well; often through jealousy. Wives usually watch their husbands when they are talking with Gemini. But if the wife only knew how safe the husband were, there would be little cause for worry. In fact, the wife, herself, could bear more watching for having such thoughts. It is not fair to Gemini to ever accuse her of trying to steal another woman's husband. It's the husband's fault, not the Gemini's, for Gemini doesn't start those things; it isn't typical of her majestic nature. But many a Gemini has been so accused. That's one of the burdens of her dual personality, her twin nature. But she doesn't divide her ardor. When she kisses one man she isn't thinking of another one. Not at the moment, at least.

The lover of such a girl must never doubt her. He should train himself to change his moods in keeping with hers. If one evening she wants to go to a concert, and the next evening a night club, he should try to get the most enjoyment out of doing each. If he can't, he should never marry the girl. The husband who is set in his ways or grooved to a certain routine of conduct is not the man to make the Gemini-Number 6 happy. To try and make her conform is to turn a Persian cat into a mountain lioness. It just can't be done with safety.

Thus, since Gemini has wings on her heels, she can't be expected to always walk slowly and softly. She must explore the mountains and valleys, jump over brooks and crevices, even though she tears her stockings and gets her feet wet. What of it? She had a good time and feels better for it. Sweethearts and husbands of Gemini girls, take notice.

This double Gemini—often called double jeopardy—has a keen memory. Never deny having said or done something in the past of which she accuses you. She'll be right every time. That's one thing she doesn't blunder on—those things which are engraved on her wax-plate recollection. That is why it is so hard for her to forget and forgive. So to all friends and lovers of Gemini, let her be the boss on all matters of memory.

When she is sad she is too sad. In such moods she deserves to be spanked sometimes. You are her best friend if you can snap her out of it. Fondness and some new excitement can do it. Or bring her a sick kitten or puppy. And because she does love animals you can rest assured she is a pretty nice person even though she looks as if she didn't have a friend in the world when she is down in the mouth. When everything else fails, give her affection. But be sure you mean it. If you don't, it's just too bad. Her sadness will become a gesture of the panther.

All in all, the Gemini-Number 6 is a girl of two different worlds. Thus, she has a double job of living and of finding herself. Early in life she must have some method of focusing her spirit on one sacred thing or duty—perhaps a certain objective in life—and no matter what her mood, she must keep that ideal or ambition before her and never let it become weak. It must be the lighthouse that keeps her from the rocks of misjudgment—a shrine at which to worship when her heart is low. If it is a man, she must make sure he is a strong and noble one. She needs love but, oh, how hard it is to find the right one. And what a lucky fellow he is when Gemini is sure.

The Gemini of pride and stride—
Her world of love is all inside.
But when she lifts the shades, you'll see
A queenly home of dignity.

17

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THE GEMINI-NUMBER 6 MAN

It has been said that the Gemini-Number 6 fellow is supported by two L-beams of power—liberty and loyalty. No wonder that typical Gemini, Patrick Henry, gave America its great motto: "Liberty or death." And no more loyal American ever lived than he.

This same loyalty makes itself felt in the world of love. He is not the fellow to turn on his sweetheart once he has declared his love.

Thus, seldom do you find a Gemini-Number 6 who doesn't impress you as a man of ideals, with the strength to live up to these ideals. The vowels of his trait are: *A*mbition, *E*xperimentation, *I*nvestigation, *O*ptimism, *U*nderstanding.

And he is capable of doing two things at one time, for like the Gemini girl, he has dual ability. His ears and eyes have double observation. He usually sees a little more than the average man. People with a so-called photographic brain are usually of Gemini. And the sweetheart of such a fellow must beware of her every word and deed, because her Gemini lover is quick to note the details as well as the causation. He makes a fine reporter, intelligence officer or art critic. As a psychologist he goes to the top.

His nature is sympathetic and sensitive. When someone misjudges a person, the Gemini man is quick to explain and adjust the misunderstanding. He is intuitive and perceptive to the *n*th degree.

This sensitivity tends to make him nervous and high strung and sometimes irritable. He doesn't want to become annoyed, but unless he guards against it he finds himself slipping into a restless mood which can be cured only by change of scenery and associates. And, being a man, he doesn't have to hold himself back when that spirit of adventure and release takes hold of him. It is very essential that the sweetheart or wife of the Gemini

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June Issue, 1943 **Lariat of Love**

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month **date** **year**

This coupon must reach the magazine before June 10, 1943

man understand this; and that when he gets a runaway mood, she doesn't think that he is tired of her. If she will let him have his head for a few days and go where he will without her, he will be all the better lover or husband upon his return. The ancients always said that "the Gemini should go to the mountains alone to recapture strength and stability." Which means that due to their high frequency of mental vibrations, they must rise above the valleys of routine life whenever they become restless or unstrung. In fact, it might be jokingly compared to Greta Garbo's phrase: "I vant to be alone." That is a Gemini trait.

The Gemini man doesn't need artificial stimulants. Heavy drinking or smoking takes a greater toll from him than from most men. Fresh air is his best friend, true love his greatest tonic.

The Gemini must be active. To loaf is to suffer. No matter what his occupation he should have a hobby for his spare hours—something more than mere recreation or rest—preferably along the lines of mechanical or inventive effort or art. Literary or educational fields are good if talents are so inclined. Raising cattle, or horses and dogs has never meant being a failure to the Gemini. By nature he loves animals.

Some people may consider the Gemini man a happy-go-lucky sort of fellow. He may give that impression, but he isn't one by nature. His indifference is only a pose, for he likes to act. He resents being studied like an open book. He rejoices when someone reads his fortune wrong, just like he will pretend that this Lariat of Love analysis is all wet should his sweetheart read it to him. But on his way home alone he will buy a copy of the magazine and read it carefully in his own room and smile. You can't help liking this fellow with the two strong shoulders—one for carrying a barrel of responsibility and the other for his sweetheart to rest her head upon.

Yes, the Gemini is a two-way fellow. The Gemini fighters of the old West always carried two guns and they could shoot equally as well with either hand. Even in the old days of courtship, when the Gemini lover proposed marriage, he never got down on one knee. It was both knees. He just can't help doing things in twos.

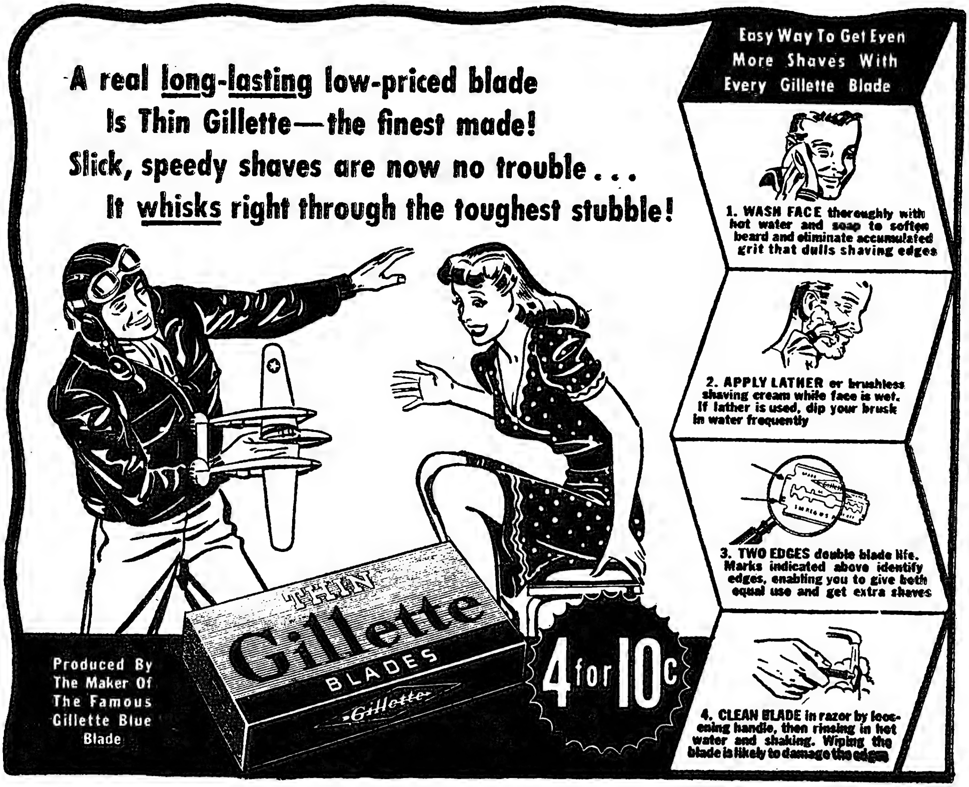
And he usually has two loves—his wife and his mother. It is hard for him not to be loyal to both. The wife of a Gemini should never demand that he be less sympathetic to his mother. And never call him a "mamma's boy." His is that deep loyalty to one who has sacrificed for him. He can be just as loyal to the wife who cherishes him. All people close to him get his sacred esteem no matter what they do. He will fight for the kid brother in trouble and not ask questions until it is all over. Then if the kid is wrong, punishment will result. But it is punishment for the father as well as the brother.

Sometimes the Gemini fellow gets a little one-sided on the matter of mental affinities and tries to beat down his emotional impulses by reason of mental differences. Such a phobia is dangerous. The Gemini man is better off with a girl who stimulates the primitive rather than the intellectual or sophisticated. A happy medium is best, with a little leeway for the primitive. He never could be happy with the ultra-passive type of girl. There is too much fire in his subconscious to be continually smothered by repression or sublimation. His wife should be the wise rather than the intellectual type. The woman who knows when to treat him like a boy and when to make him the conventional gentleman of refinement is the mate who will bring him happiness.

His job should not be too confining or routine. He should have an occupation which demands getting out and around frequently. An inspection job is good—something which demands quick thinking and judgment, or where anything might happen, and he can be ready for the emergency. In fact he makes a good fireman or policeman and, of course, a soldier, sailor or marine.

All in all, his Mercury gives him wings. He must be able to look up, not down. There's nothing of the grave-digger in his make-up. His wife, for that matter, should not be too short—better his own size or even taller. His hands and his heart should never be folded but always active. The moment he becomes too self-conscious he becomes morose. His joy is in helping others to smile and to keep their chins up. Never belittle his position in life or his love. But expect the best of him and he will live up to it. By intuition he can detect deceit, so never practice it and expect to get away with it. Chastise him by making him ashamed of himself—never by vicious condemnation. Ask him to kiss you—don't you kiss him. He prefers to give rather than to receive. That is typical of the open-handed Gemini. Love him and trust to luck—it will be with you, for he is a good investment for those who know how to have faith. The Indian-giver will never hold her Gemini. Faith, hope and charity are something he understands and respects.

The Gemini fellow is two men in one.
He starts with his left when his right hand is done.
If he hurts you today, don't dwell on your sorrow,
His love will be double and precious tomorrow.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THE OVERLAND MAIL

Friends! All of us have them, all of us need them, all of us like them. But one thing we can be sure of—none of us have too many of them. Old friendships are warming, cozy relationships, but the new ones have a unique quality in themselves—a vitality that stimulates and freshens. Let us open the road to those new friends via the mail route.

Be sure that your name and address are on your letter. For legibility, kindly print name and address.

A nurse with literary leanings.

Dear Editor:

I am a nurse in my forties and would like to correspond with Pals around my own age. I like to travel, have written two books and several short articles for newspapers. Camping out, fishing, hunting, dancing, boating and driving a car—all those things I enjoy doing, too. I am told I have an extraordinarily good disposition. Won't you Pals write to me and find out for yourselves?—Raye Sunshine, 821 V Street, Arleita Apartments, Fresno, California.

Hello, everybody!

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of sixteen, have brown hair, hazel eyes, and stand five-feet-seven. I love all sports, especially dancing. Everybody all over the world is welcome to write, especially service people. I will exchange snapshots and souvenirs with all who write, so come on, Pals, sling some ink my way.—Delora Fennel, Prague, Oklahoma, Route 2, Box 143B.

Name your sport and ask any question about it.

Dear Editor:

I would like to find some friends through the Overland Mail. I am an active boy of sixteen, five-feet-eleven, weigh one hundred and forty-seven pounds, have brown hair and brown eyes. I participate in all sports and will gladly answer any questions on this subject, as I have a thorough knowledge of it. My hobby is collecting photographs of orchestra leaders and vocalists, and I will exchange photos with those who want to do so. Please write to me, Pals.—Jon Crawford, 131-19 222nd Street, Springfield, Long Island, New York.

Gets around on skates all right.

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of fourteen who would love to have just gobs of Pen Pals all over the world. I have reddish-brown hair, blue eyes, stand five feet tall and tip the scales at one hundred and three pounds. I like all kinds of sports and do a lot of roller skating. All letters will be answered, and I'd especially like to hear from those between fourteen and sixteen. Fill my box, won't you, Pals?—Virginia Bates, The Heights, Michigan, Box 93.

Two reg'lar fellers.

Dear Editor:

We are two boys trying to find Pen Pals. Andrew is sixteen years old, stands five-feet-five, and has hazel eyes and black hair. Matthew is seventeen, stands five-feet-five, too, and has hazel eyes and brown hair. Our hobbies are collecting pictures. Please, Pals, drop us a line.—Matthew Jamrog and Andrew Godzyk, 225 B. Turnpike Road, Manchester, New Hampshire.

Sings almost all day—with plenty of yodels.

Dear Editor:

I do hope there is room for a letter from an eighteen-year-old farm girl. I play several instruments and enjoy all kinds of music. I sing almost all day long while I work, mostly Western songs, with plenty of yodels. My greatest hobbies are reading and collecting post cards and souvenirs, and I love dancing, skating, movies and traveling. Won't you drop me a few lines, Pals?—Eleen Sendek, Foley, Minnesota, Route 2.

Sure, she'll even teach you the Hawaiian hula via mail.

Dear Editor:

Here's an S O S to cowfolks, service Pals, rangers and poets. I am a gal of twenty-one, five-feet-six, have blue eyes, brown hair, and want to hear from all who are in line with my yens. So come on, all ye, sling some ink my way and I'll answer all letters and exchange photos. I'll even teach you the Hawaiian hula by way of mail. Here's hoping I hear from one and all. Let's go!—Roberta Siddall, 1141 Tremont Avenue, S. W., Massillon, Ohio.

The West with its ranches and music—ah-h-h-h-h!

Dear Editor:

I am a seventeen-year-old girl with long, brown curly hair, blue-green eyes, fair complexion, and stand five-feet-three. I love the West with its cowboys, ranches and Western music. My greatest desire is to live on a ranch, and my ambition is to become a nurse or air hostess. I play the piano and the bugle and am learning to play the guitar. And my other hobbies are numerous. Everybody, fill my mailbox to the rim. Remember, I'll be more than willing to help you out with your hobbies. By the way, have I a twin? My birthday is Decem-

28 WAYS TO KILL A

JAPANAZI

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ber 26th.—Virginia Tettenhorst, 1019 South Madison Avenue, Aurora, Missouri.

It's a cowboy's life for him.

Dear Editor:

I am a young man of twenty-eight, have light-brown hair and blue eyes, stand five feet eleven and a half inches tall, and weigh one hundred and sixty-seven pounds. I am an ex-cavalryman, working with Uncle Sam for eight months, now honorably discharged for reasons of health. I haven't been in town long and I'm going back to the ranch where I came from, as I like the cowboy life. Meanwhile, I sure do get lonesome. How about fixing that for me, Pals?—Merritt L. Morrison, 822 Gidding Street, Clovis, New Mexico.

Swap notes on your movie-star collections.

Dear Editor:

Come on, all you Pals, write to a lonely girl of fifteen. I have brown hair and eyes and stand five-feet-four. My hobby is collecting pictures of movie stars, and I just love to dance. Please write soon, Pals. I'm waiting eagerly for your letters.—Emma Hutschenreuter, 1529 N. Eden Street, Baltimore, Maryland.

Do your bit for a defense worker.

Dear Editor:

I am a gray-eyed, nineteen-year-old girl very much in the market for Pen Pals. At the present time, I am doing defense work. The hours are long and tiring and, believe me, a few letters would certainly cheer me up. All letters will be answered promptly.—Lillian Kraemer, 1311 Eighth Avenue, Southeast, St. Cloud, Minnesota.

An honest-to-gosh cowgal from Texas!

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely cowgirl from Texas trying to round up some stray Pals. I am fourteen, with brown hair and blue eyes, have spent most of my life on a ranch, and I love horses. My hobbies are collecting cowboy songs, movie-star pictures, and riding horseback. Come on, kids, brighten my lonely hours.—Polly Luttes, San Benito, Texas.

He just can't wait until he gets into the army.

Dear Editor:

I am a boy of sixteen, almost seventeen, with brown hair, blue eyes, and weigh one hundred and sixty pounds. I do lots of reading and take part in all active sports. Maybe soon I'll be able to get into the armed forces. My main hobby is photography, but I'd prefer doing some front-line shooting right now. Won't all you Pals get in touch with me?—Max Schoulten, 119 South Fifth Street, Grand Haven, Michigan.

Amy's amiable.

Dear Editor:

Please print my plea for Pen Pals in your Overland Mail. I am a lonely girl of fifteen, very friendly, stand five-feet-three, have reddish-brown hair, greenish-brown eyes, and weigh one hundred and three pounds. My hobbies are collecting snapshots and picture post cards. I love all sports, including dancing and going to the movies. Please fill my mailbox, Pals.—Amy Berryhill, Fayette, Alabama, Route 2.

She plays the Spanish guitar.

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of sixteen and kind of lonesome. I have brown hair and eyes, and stand five feet seven and a half inches tall. I'm a sort of musician—I play the Spanish guitar and sing, too. All kinds of sports appeal to me, and I love dancing. Come one, come all, get busy on those letters.—Jane Brewer, Route 8, Keene, New Hampshire.

A pair of chums who'd like some more.

Dear Editor:

We are two chums, both nineteen years old, and we'd like to hear from Pals all over the United States. Both of us like movies, bowling, writing and receiving letters. Pals, write to us and you can be sure of an answer. We're waiting.—Muriel Hoppe, 49 Flower Street, Manchester, Connecticut; Florence Wright, 18 Chestnut Street, Manchester, Connecticut.

California, here she comes!

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely girl of twelve, have auburn hair and brown eyes, stand five-feet-one, and weigh one hunderd and three pounds. I would like to hear from Pals all over, but especially from California. My hobbies are collecting miniature glass animals and stamps. My favorite sports are swimming, horseback riding, football, baseball and basketball. Won't you please answer my plea?—Dolores Wimer, P. O. Box 24, Harpster, Ohio.

High-school freshie.

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Romantic Range for quite some time, and I think it's swell. I am a girl of fourteen, a freshman in high school, have blue eyes and blond hair, and stand five-feet-four. Writing letters is a grand occupation, I think, and since I love to do so, I promise prompt replies. I'm hoping to get letters from all over the world.—Dorothy Forshee, Frankclay, Missouri.

A word with this gent, please.

Dear Editor:

I am a young man of twenty, five-feet-seven, with brown eyes and hair. Pen Pals are my special interest, and I want letters. I enjoy skating, dancing and bowling, and know I can make my correspondence interesting. Come on, Pals, get busy. I'll exchange snapshots with you, if you want to.—Laurel Clark, 6606 B Street, Seat Pleasant, Maryland.

Now, what good's an empty mailbox?

Dear Editor:

My mailbox is empty, so won't you help me find some Pen Pals to fill it up? I am a girl of twenty-one, five-feet-five in height, have curly brown hair and brown eyes. My hobby is writing and receiving letters. Everyone is welcome, and you Pals in service are particularly invited to write. Come on, everybody! —Lillie Gehrig, 518 Park Avenue, Huntington, Long Island, New York.

Happy-go-lucky—she'll make you feel that way, too.

Dear Editor:

Could I be a passenger in your Overland Mail? I am a blue-eyed blonde, stand five-feet-seven, and am fifteen years old. I'm the happy-go-lucky type and

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romantic

adore fun. My hobbies are collecting pins and post cards, and I also enjoy dancing. Come on, Pals, swing about this way and write to me. I'll gladly exchange photos with you.—Carol Anderson, 212 Fifth Street, So. Virginia, Minnesota.

He's a designer by trade.

Dear Editor:

I am a young man of twenty-eight, six-feet-one, have fair complexion and weigh one hundred and ninety pounds. I like all sports, especially football. By trade I'm a designer, and my main hobby is writing letters. Please allow me the opportunity of proving this is my hobby, Pals. Won't you drop a line now?—R. E. (Woody) Haynes, 336 E. Prospect, Jackson, Michigan.

She's keeping her fingers crossed.

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of nineteen and have been reading your magazine regularly ever since I was fourteen years old. I'd like to have some Pen Pals now. I have brown curly hair, gray eyes, and weigh one hundred and ten pounds. Most sports appeal to me, and you'll find me a good correspondent. So please, Pals, send the mail this way. I'm keeping my fingers crossed.—Dorothy Jackson, 672 Smith, Detroit, Michigan.

Football and baseball are his games.

Dear Editor:

I am a young man of twenty-seven with dark hair and eyes. This is my first plea for Pen Pals, so please don't disappoint me. I like football and baseball and would enjoy talking it over with some of you Pals. Give me a break, Pals, and shoot the mail along.—L. A. Longhlin, Santa Rosa, New Mexico.

Three little girls are we—

Dear Editor:

We are three high-school girls who are very lonesome and would like to make some new friends. Jean is seventeen, stands five-feet-two, has light-brown curly hair and blue eyes, and her hobby is playing the Hawaiian guitar. Martha is sixteen, stands five-feet-five, has dark-brown hair and blue eyes. Her hobby is collecting cowboy songs and pictures.

Helen is eighteen years old, has brown hair and blue eyes, stands five feet one and a half, and her hobby is collecting songs. We will exchange snapshots with the first ten who write to us. So come on, everybody, particularly cowfolks, drop us a line.—Helen Henderson, Martha Buchanan and Jean Henderson, Donnelly, Idaho, Box 13.

Mark time—here's a rhyme.

Dear Editor:

Attention! Calling all Pals!
  Hi, there. Greetings, true blue!
A little gal from way out West
  Wants to write to you.

Five-feet-four,
  I'm cheerful and gay,
Considered a blonde
  And that ain't hay!

Pals, please consider my case today.
  Hurry up—hurry, please do—
Write to this address right away
  And maybe your morale'll be lifted, too.

—George Lee, 2030 South Franklin Street, Denver, Colorado.

Your mail's the medicine for what ails her.

Dear Editor:

I am a woman of forty-four and very lonely. Won't some of you Pen Pals write to me? I am a great lover of reading and writing. Pen Pals from North, South, East and West—come on, folks, and do your best. Here's hoping I hear from other readers of Romantic Range who think that magazine is tops, too.—M. E. Freeman, P. O. Box 27, Crockett, Texas.

Just a regular American gal.

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of eighteen with wavy auburn hair, green eyes and a fair complexion. Making friends is my favorite pastime, and I would like letters from everyone, everywhere. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots. I'm just an American girl who enjoys traveling and outdoor sports. Do write to me.—Florence Downey, Route 3, Maryville, Tennessee.

Sure 'nuff, another poet!

Dear Editor:

I am a boy of fifteen, five feet tall, and weigh eighty-nine pounds. I have blue eyes and light-brown hair. My hobbies are writing poems and stories, and reading. I have written several poems already. Please, all you Pals around my age, drop me a line.—Arthur Plett, P. O. Box 146, Lehigh, Kansas.

Rolling along, singing a song—

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of Romantic Range and enjoy it very much. I am a married woman of twenty-five, blond, brown-eyed and about five feet one. I like most sports, especially roller skating. My favorite pastimes are knitting, sewing and letter writing. All letters will be answered promptly, and I will exchange snapshots with those who care to do so. Come on, everybody, everywhere, I'll be expecting to hear from you.—Mildred Ward, 389 Broad Street, Windsor, Connecticut.

A ten-year-oldster.

Dear Editor:

I am a girl ten years old, four feet eleven, have dark-blond hair and blue eyes, and weigh sixty-eight pounds. My hobby is collecting skins from animals, birds and snakes. I live on a farm and love animals, and especially like to ride horses. Won't you please write to me, Pals?—Diane Brady, P. O. Box 684, Nyssa, Oregon.

Hunts and fishes—this time for friends.

Dear Editor:

I would like to hear from Pen Pals all over the States. It gets lonesome here on the farm where I live, and I will answer letters promptly. I am a boy with black hair, brown eyes, and stand five feet seven. My favorite sports are hunting, fishing and swimming, and my hobby is collecting snapshots. I sure hope I get plenty of mail.—James Haney, Oxford, Georgia, R. F. D. I.

This gal's riding high!

Dear Editor:

My opinion of Romantic Range is—swell! I am a girl of fifteen with brown hair, dark-brown eyes and stand five feet eight. I am full of fun and my hobbies are collecting picture post cards and match covers. All sports appeal to me, especially horseback riding and long hikes. I also play the guitar and sing, and I love to ride in an airplane. My ambition is to become an airplane pilot or a singer. I solemnly promise to answer all letters that I receive. Fingers crossed that my mailbox fills up.—Lois Mundy, P. O. Box 294, North Tazewell, Virginia.

She's always dimpling.

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of sixteen, and would like to try my luck at getting some Pen Pals. I have dark-brown hair and eyes, dimples, and a fair complexion. My favorite hobbies are collecting military pens and snapshots of friends. My favorite sports are basketball and bicycle riding. Pals, all over the world, won't you write to me?—Betty Whittington, Moorefield, West Virginia.

New Yorkers in demand!

Dear Editor:

I am a young fellow of twenty-two and want to hear from all Pals who live in New York City or vicinity. My letters, I can promise you, will be interesting, and I promise to exchange snaps with all who desire to do so. Come on, you New Yorkers, get in touch with a New Yorker as fast as you can.—Stanley Mordel, 275 Marlborough Road, Brooklyn, N. Y.

A tomboy in cowboy clothes.

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely girl of seventeen with reddish-brown hair and gray-blue eyes, and stand five feet four. I love to go around as a tomboy in cowboy clothes, and enjoy most anything you Pals enjoy, but most of all I like acting. I'm hoping to come out West in the spring so that I can be close to Hollywood and get there eventually. Write to me, Pals, especially you movie cowfolks.—Rusty Skean, Box 69, Limerick, Pennsylvania.

Gets kinda lonesome in a sanitarium.

Dear Editor:

I am a reader of Romantic Range and enjoy it very much. I'm a young man of twenty-one, five feet six, with brown hair and eyes. At present I'm a patient in a sanitarium, and it gets kinda lonesome at times. I sure would like to get plenty of mail. My main ambition is to get a picture post card from each State. I can tell lots about Arizona if anyone wishes to know about a swell State.—Clyde Jenkins, State Sanitarium, Tempe, Arizona.

Any novelty pins in your collection?

Dear Editor:

I am very much interested in your Pen Pals department and wonder if you will add my name to it. I am a girl of fifteen with light-brown, natural curly hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are collecting novelty pins and snapshots, which I will be glad to exchange with those who wish to. I am looking forward to hearing from all of you, from all over the world, so come on and fill my mailbox. Please don't disappoint me.—Kathleen Herbaugh, Box 41, Moorefield, West Virginia.

A professional dancer and dance marm.

Dear Editor:

Will you please print my letter in your Overland Mail? I am a professional dancer and dance teacher, have black hair and dark eyes, am thirty-four years old, and stand five feet six. Although I am in the dancing profession and spend a great deal of time on the stage, I get lonesome and want to hear from Pals from—well, there is no age limit. Here's hoping I get a wagon load of letters.—Billie Timberlake, Box 69, Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Now, what have you got to say about music?

Dear Editor:

I am a reader of Romantic Range and like it very much. I am a young man of twenty-seven, six feet one, with black hair and brown eyes. My favorite activities are music, collecting post cards and writing long letters. Come on, Pals, fill my mailbox. I can stand it.—George Van Gorden, R. R. 3, Box 74, Boscobel, Wisconsin.

Come to the aid of a nurse's aid.

Dear Editor:

Here's a Pal who certainly can use some new friends. I'm thirty-four, stand five feet three and am a nurse's aid.

Since I am on night duty now, I have lots of time to write. I've certainly enjoyed your magazine every time I've read it, and I'm sure I will enjoy the friendship of Pals I meet through it. All letters will be answered promptly.—Ada Nation, Sunnyslope Sanitarium, Ottumwa, Iowa.

Three's a crowd, and a crowd's fun.

Dear Editor:

They say that two's company and three's a crowd. Well, I guess we are a crowd, for there are three of us, two of whom are twins. We are swing shifters in a local aircraft company, very fond of horses, swimming and basketball. We are originally from Utah. All of you, let us hear, and quickly!—Merle and Pearl Fisher, Rae Larsen, 822 South Parkview Street, Los Angeles, California.

Make way for an angel!

Dear Editor:

I laugh a little—sing a little
As I go along my way;
Work a little—play a little
And I do this every day.

I sew a little—bake a little—
Well, pretty well, they say;
But salty tears get in my dough
Since I am far away.

I'm bad a little—good a little,
Or at least I try to be;
I'll be an angel from now on
If you will write to me.—Mary Moore, 3668—16th Street, San Francisco, California.

"Howdy, howdy," sez this cowboy.

Dear Editor:

Howdy! Won't you please print my plea for Pen Pals? I'm a cowboy living on a large ranch and it sure gets lonesome. Rodeos are my specialty, and I love dancing, especially the barn-dance type. Here's hoping this letter ropes a corral full of Pals. Everyone is welcome, regardless of age, and all answers will be sent off pronto.—Charles Friez, Route 1, Box 105, Escalon, California.

Please, may she collect your postmark?

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of fifteen with black hair and brown eyes. My main hobby is col-

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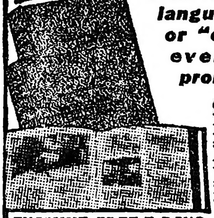

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lecting postmarks. May I collect yours, please? Everybody, everywhere, get in touch with me. Don't forget, I'm waiting.—Anne Marie Doran, Crow Rock Stage, Miles City, Montana.

She dances—her horse prances.

Dear Editor:

I am a fifteen-year-old girl, four feet eleven, with dark hair and eyes, and weigh ninety-nine pounds. I would like to hear from Pals of all ages. My hobbies are dancing and horseback riding. I would be glad to exchange snapshots and ribbons with those who wish to do so. I get very lonesome sometimes, so please drop me a line, everybody.—Cecilia Arales, 3614 Clifford Street, Portsmouth, Virginia.

She just loves the West.

Dear Editor:

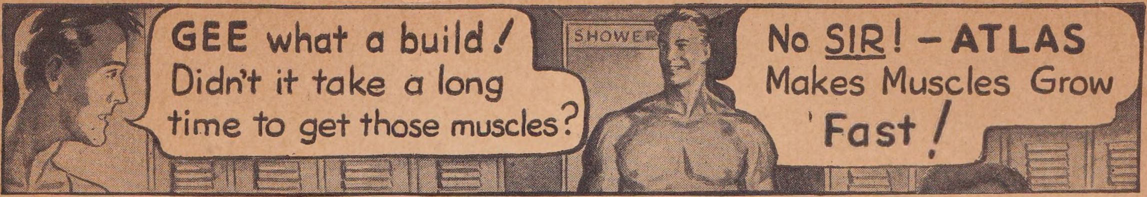
I am a widow of forty-six, five feet seven, with dark-brown hair and blue eyes, a little old-fashioned in my ideas, perhaps, and I would like to hear from Pals in the West. I love the West and hope some day to have a home in the country. My hobbies are fancywork, reading, hiking, and I enjoy housework. Please write to me. I will try to answer all letters.—Mrs. Ruth Laney, 484 North 11th Street, St. Helens, Oregon.

He's a banjo and guitar strummer—the mandolin's next.

Dear Editor:

I'm a regular reader of Romantic Range and enjoy it very much. I'm a young man of twenty-four, five feet six, with blue eyes, sandy hair and fair complexion. My most important hobby is music, though I also like a game of football or baseball. I play the guitar and five-string banjo, and my main desire at present is to learn to play the mandolin. I'd like to correspond with Pals living anywhere in the United States.—Roy Elbert Barnes, Box 88, Weaverville, North Carolina.

The publishers of Romantic Range assume no responsibility for the above list of Pen Pals.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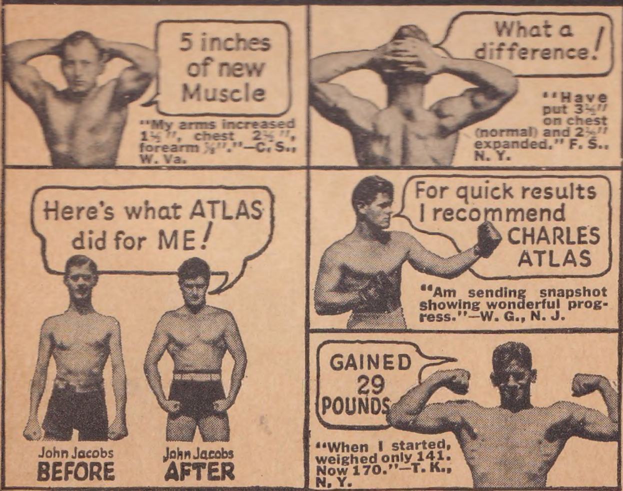
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What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension,"* you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

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In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book **today.... AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 625, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.**

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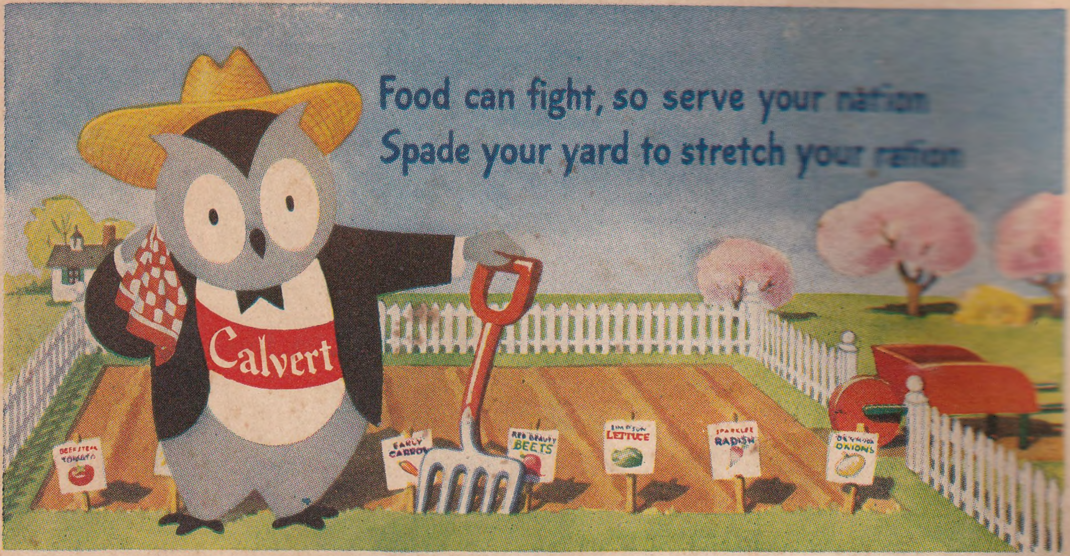
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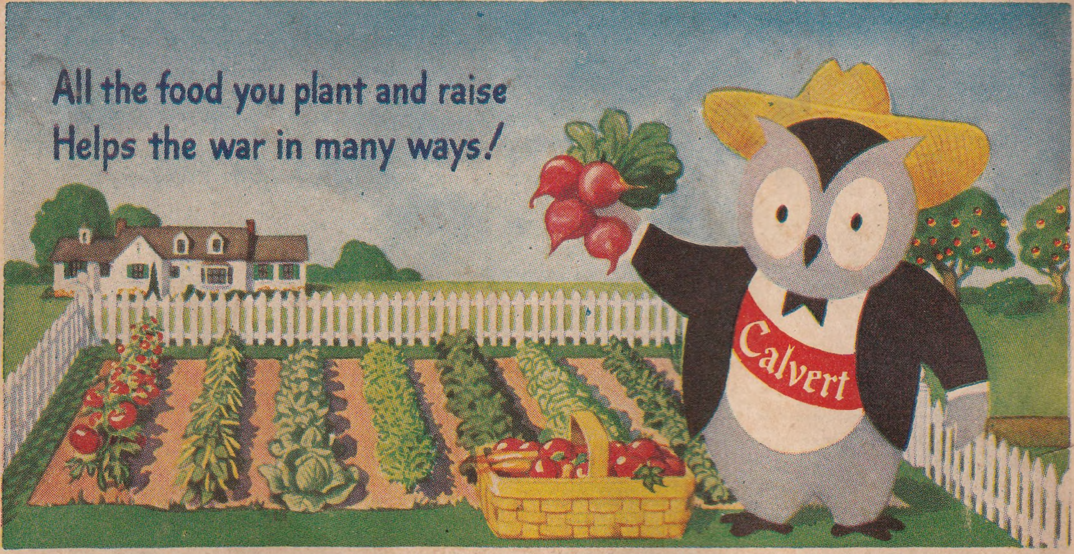
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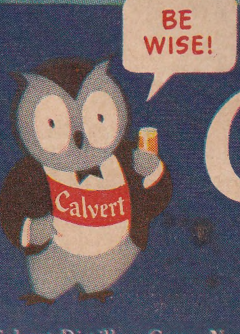
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